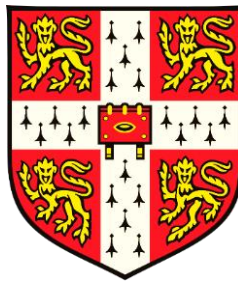

Children and childhood under the Irish Poor Law,
c.1850-1914



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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or at any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

The word count for this thesis is 80,000 words.

The *Irish Historical Studies* style of referencing has been adopted in this thesis.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the provision of poor relief for children under the Irish Poor Law during the post-Famine era, and it argues that prevailing social constructs of childhood had a major influence upon how welfare was provided for the children within the workhouse institutions. The Irish Poor Law, centred on the workhouse, was the first national system of statutory poor relief and it marked a significant change in how poor children and families were provided for in Ireland. Through a statistical analysis of workhouse populations, the thesis explores the how the demography of pauper children changed in the decades following the Great Famine. Poor relief was a key element in the economy of makeshifts of poor families, and the analysis of workhouse admission registers shows that children's family circumstances largely determined the reasons for which children entered a workhouse. Children also received an education in the workhouse school in the form of schooling in literacy and a gendered programme of industrial training. However, the institutional environment was detrimental to children's health and this precipitated efforts to remove children from the workhouses into alternative forms of care. This study details how these various aspects of poor relief encountered by children in the workhouses were interlinked and together informed the cultural imagining of the ambiguous concept of a pauper childhood.

Abbreviations

GCCA	Galway County Council Archives, Galway
KCL	Kerry County Library, Tralee
NAI	National Archives of Ireland, Dublin
NLI	National Library of Ireland, Dublin
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast
TS	Tipperary Studies, Thurles

Introduction

The workhouse child

I: Introduction

The historical care of children in state and religious institutions has been at the forefront of Irish social and political consciousness in recent years. A greater level of public awareness has developed about the past extent of institutional child welfare in Ireland, as well as a recognition of the physical and emotional traumas experienced by some of the children placed in such care.¹ Institutional welfare dominated the provision of care for poor children in Ireland from the beginning of the nineteenth century through to the late twentieth century, but it has been under-researched by historians. As noted by Catherine Cox, the current state of scholarship concerning the establishment and development of Irish institutional care, and of the experiences of the individuals who received it, is at an early stage relative to other countries.²

The plethora of asylums, orphanages, prisons, reformatories, industrial schools, hospitals, and workhouses which operated in Ireland together comprised what has been termed the ‘Irish institutional web’ and ‘the nation’s architecture of containment’: an interconnected and overlapping network of philanthropic, religious, and government-supported institutions that provided a range of general, specialist, and reformative forms of welfare for the poorer classes and their children.³ As the main source of poor relief for destitute families during the nineteenth and early twentieth

¹ In 1999, public attention was first directed towards the mistreatment of children in residential institutions by the investigative journalism of Mary Raftery. More recently, independent inquiries into the historical institutional abuse of children have been conducted and published in the Republic of Ireland (2009) and in Northern Ireland (2017). See: Mary Raftery and Eoin O’Sullivan, *Suffer the little children: the inside story of Ireland’s industrial schools* (Dublin, 1999).

² Catherine Cox, ‘Institutionalism in Irish history and society’ in Mary McAuliffe et al (eds), *Palgrave advances in Irish history* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp 169-90.

³ Elaine Farrell, “‘Poor prison flowers’: convict mothers and their children in Ireland, 1853-1900”, *Social History*, 41 (2016), p. 188; James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen laundries and the nation’s architecture of containment* (Notre Dame, IN, 2007), p. 2.

centuries, the workhouses established under the auspices of the Irish Poor Law were at the centre of this network. This thesis explores children's encounters with the workhouses of the Irish Poor Law during the post-Famine era, circa 1850 to 1914, and it examines the influence of prevailing cultural constructs of childhood upon how welfare was provided for the children within these institutions.

II: Children and the Irish Poor Law

In 1838, the Irish Poor Law was established with the passing of the 'Act for the more effectual relief of the destitute poor in Ireland'.⁴ Based upon the recommendations of the English Poor Law Commissioner George Nicholls on the feasibility of a workhouse system of relief for Ireland, the Irish legislation bore close similarities to the New Poor Law of 1834 which applied to England and Wales. Under the Irish Poor Law, the country was divided into 130 Poor Law Unions, each of which was of approximately eight miles' radius and centred upon a 'fortress-like' workhouse institution.⁵ The provision of relief in each Poor Law Union was funded through a property-based 'poor rate', and it was administered by a Board of Guardians comprised of a mix of ex-officio appointed members and members elected by local ratepayers. The implementation of the poor relief system by Boards of Guardians was supervised at the national level initially by the Poor Law Commission in London (1838-47), then by the Irish Poor Law Commissioners based in Dublin (1847-72), and later the Local Government Board for Ireland (1873-1920).

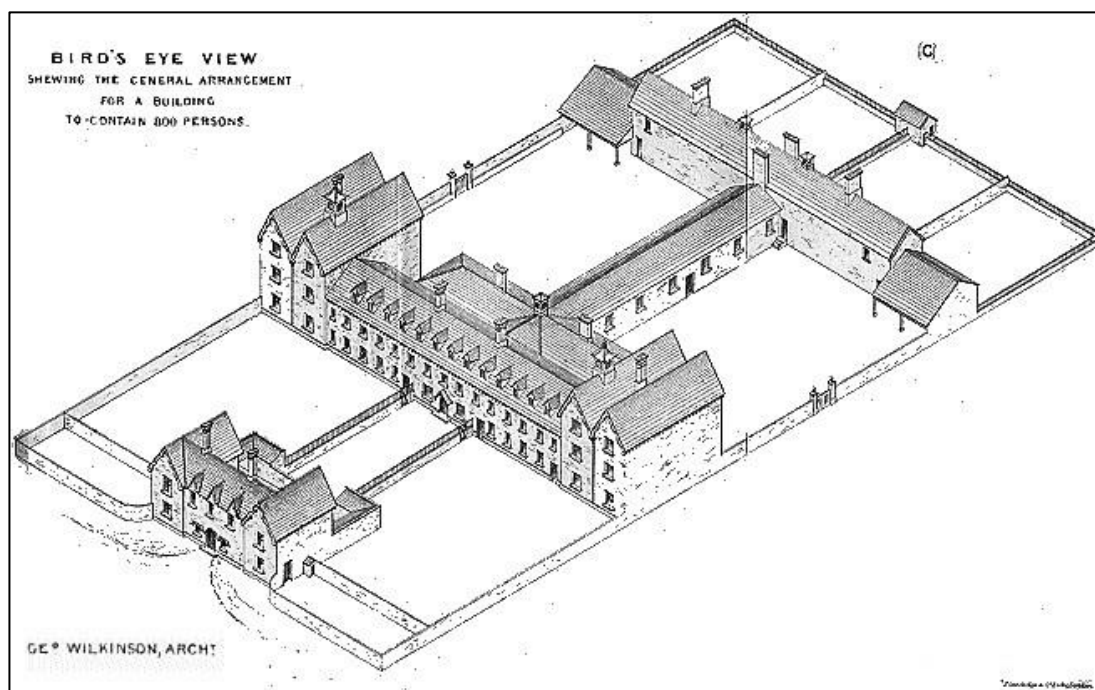
The workhouses were designed to a standard plan by George Wilkinson whose architectural drawing of a workhouse for 800 inmates is shown in Figure 1.⁶ In urban

⁴ For a discussion on the establishment and ideology of Irish Poor Law, see: Virginia Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland, 1838-1948* (Dublin, 2006); Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish Poor Law, 1815-43* (Manchester, 2009).

⁵ Johann G. Kohl, *Travels in Ireland* (London, 1844), p. 225.

⁶ For a discussion on the design and construction of the workhouses in Ireland, see: Peter Gray, 'Conceiving and constructing the Irish workhouse, 1836-45', *Irish Historical Studies*, 38 (2012), pp 22-35.

Figure 1: Architectural perspective of a workhouse for 800 paupers, 1839



Source: Fifth annual report of the Poor Law Commissioners, [239], H.C. 1839, xx, 1, p. 90

Unions, where the resident populations were larger than in rural areas and where the number of applications for poor relief were expected to be highest, the workhouses were constructed to accommodate greater numbers of inmates. For example, the Belfast workhouse could accommodate 3,000 inmates. By the early 1850s, an additional 33 workhouses had been constructed, mainly in western and southern areas of the country, in response to overcrowding in the workhouses during the Great Famine of 1845-50.

The provision of relief under the Irish Poor Law was underpinned by the ideological principle of less eligibility whereby conditions in the workhouses were less attractive than the living conditions available to the labouring classes outside. The enforcement of less eligibility, termed by the poor relief authorities as the ‘workhouse test of destitution’, was intended to deter all but the most destitute from seeking relief.

Rather than in terms of inferior food or other material conditions, less eligibility acted primarily as a psychological deterrent against potential applicants who feared the loss of their independence.⁷ In 1841, the Poor Law Commissioners anticipated that the psychological aspect of less eligibility was essential in the Irish context since the abject conditions of the poorer classes precluded the provision of even worse conditions in a workhouse:

We are satisfied that the diet, clothing, bedding ... may in the workhouse be better than in the neighbouring cottages, and yet that none but the really destitute poor will seek for admission into the workhouse; ... It is in truth the regularity, order, strict enforcement of cleanliness, constant occupation, the preservation of decency and decorum, and exclusion of all the irregular habits and tempting excitements of life, on which reliance must mainly be placed for deterring individuals, not actually and unavoidably destitute, from seeking refuge within the workhouse.⁸

In his description of an Irish workhouse from 1844, the German travel writer Johann Georg Kohl observed that less eligibility was manifested by ‘a system of terror’ in which ‘discipline seems to me to be rude, severe, and unmitigated by kindness.’⁹ According to the historian John O’Connor, it was less eligibility that made the workhouse ‘the most hated and feared institution ever established in Ireland.’¹⁰ The poor relief authorities considered it inappropriate to apply less eligibility to the provision of poor relief for children who were viewed as blameless for their state of destitution.¹¹ However, by the regime of strict discipline, the stigma of association with pauperism, the wearing of uniforms, and especially by the separation of families upon admission, children in a workhouse were subject to many aspects of less eligibility.

⁷ Margaret A. Crowther, *The workhouse system, 1834-1929: the history of an English social institution* (London, 1981), pp 40-1.

⁸ Anon., ‘The destitute poor of Ireland’, *The Irish Penny Journal*, 1 (1841), p. 275.

⁹ Johann G. Kohl, *Ireland, Scotland, and England* (London, 1844), p. 156.

¹⁰ John O’Connor, *The workhouses of Ireland: the fate of Ireland’s poor* (Dublin, 1995), p. 6.

¹¹ Anon., ‘The destitute poor of Ireland’, p. 275.

The historiography about the various forms of poor relief that were received and experienced by children under the Irish Poor Law is sparse. The scholarly study about children in the workhouse has been focused upon local experiences during the years of Great Famine.¹² The most recent studies, published in 2018 in the interdisciplinary volume *Children and the Great Hunger in Ireland*, have explored in depth the harsh treatment of children in the famine workhouses, the ravages of hunger-induced disease upon children, and the fate of those who were assisted to emigrate to Canada during the disaster.¹³ The sufferings that were experienced by relief recipients during the Great Famine had a significant influence upon how relief was administered and accessed in the later nineteenth century, and it left an indelible mark upon popular perceptions of the workhouse.¹⁴ In 1906, the Irish Workhouse Association, a body that advocated reform of the poor relief system, noted that the ‘famine of Black ’47’ and ‘the callous and inhuman huddling together of starving human beings’ in the workhouses had ‘left memories behind which the lapse of half a century had not effaced.’¹⁵

Children were one of the most vulnerable demographic groups to starvation and infectious disease and they accounted for almost half of the estimated one million famine-induced fatalities.¹⁶ Scholarly studies of children’s experiences in the workhouses during the Great Famine have been essential for contextualising the provision of poor relief for children during the post-Famine era. The demographics of relief recipients were shaped by the Great Famine for years after the disaster on account of the thousands of children who had been left orphaned or abandoned. Moreover, not only did the prevalence of orphaned and abandoned children in the

¹² For example, see: Anne Lanigan, ‘Tipperary workhouse children and the Famine’, *Tipperary Historical Journal*, 2 (1995), pp 54-80.

¹³ Christine Kinealy et al (eds), *Children and the Great Hunger in Ireland* (Cork, 2018).

¹⁴ Virginia Crossman, “‘With the experience of 1846 and 1847 before them’: the politics of emergency relief, 1879-84’ in Peter Gray (ed.), *Victoria’s Ireland? Irishness and Britishness, 1837-1901* (Dublin, 2004), pp 167-82; Peter Gray, ‘Irish social thought and the relief of poverty, 1847-1880’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 20 (2010), pp 141-56.

¹⁵ *Freeman’s Journal*, 21 Dec. 1906.

¹⁶ Phelim P. Boyle and Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Fertility trends, excess mortality, and the Great Irish Famine’, *Demography*, 23 (1986), pp 543-62.

workhouses during the 1850s contribute towards a persistent popular assumption that almost all workhouse children were orphans, it also informed the development of poor relief policies related to children's education, health, and foster care.

The limited body of scholarly studies on children's welfare in the workhouses has meant that much of our understanding of how children were provided for under the Irish Poor Law is based upon assumed knowledge. Under the Poor Law regulations, children were classed as those under 15 years of age. However, we know little of the demographics of pauper children, or of the range of reasons for which they were admitted into a workhouse.¹⁷ Even in the sphere of children's work and industrial training, perhaps the subject most popularly associated with the experience of the workhouse child, there has been few critical examinations of how such training was provided or of how it related to the subsequent employment of children from the workhouses.¹⁸ In 1912, Susanne Day, a Guardian of the Cork Union and especially interested in the care of pauper women and children, claimed that the contemporary popular understanding of children in the workhouses was informed largely by assumptions and by the literary figure of *Oliver Twist*:

Of all the thousands of men and women who daily pass the great gates of our Irish Workhouses, how many, we wonder, give a thought to the child life within? To how many does the term 'the workhouse child' conjure up a vision of *Oliver Twist*, empty porridge cup in hand, asking for more, and to how many, an army of young boys and girls, the citizens of to-morrow, thrust through no fault of their own into surroundings shadowed by failure and disgrace?¹⁹

¹⁷ For short discussions on the reasons for the admission of children into the workhouses, see: Dympna McLoughlin, 'Pauper children in Ireland, 1840-70' in Breandan Ó Conaire (ed.), *The famine lectures: léachtaí an ghorta* (Boyle, 1997), pp 288-9; Olwen Purdue, 'Poverty and power: the Irish Poor Law in a north Antrim town, 1861-1921', *Irish Historical Studies*, 37 (2011), pp 567-83; Virginia Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Liverpool, 2013), pp 131-9.

¹⁸ For studies that explore industrial training, see: Joseph Robins, *The lost children: a study of charity children in Ireland, 1700-1900* (Dublin, 1980), pp 233-43; Colman O'Mahony, *Cork's Poor Law palace: workhouse life, 1838-90* (Monkstown, 2005), pp 123-44. For studies that explore industrial training in industrial schools and orphan societies, see: Jane Barnes, *Irish industrial schools, 1868-1908: origins and development* (Dublin, 1989), pp 26-31, 118-45; June Cooper, *The Protestant Orphan Society and its social significance in Ireland, 1828-1940* (Manchester, 2015), pp 185-98.

¹⁹ Susanne R. Day, 'The workhouse child', *The Irish Review*, 2 (1912), p. 169.

Day argued that the public has little real knowledge of workhouse children's experience of poor relief or of the effects of the workhouse institution upon them:

The passer-by, if he thinks at all about these little derelicts, will find a thousand questions thronging upon his mind. How are they housed, how fed, how trained; is their education one that will secure for them economic independence by and bye [sic], will it give them a fair start in life, develop their resources, and teach them independence and self reliance [sic], or is it a machine-made system turning out machine-made animated images, without ambition, without initiative, without individuality?²⁰

These passages were indicative of the ambiguities surrounding contemporary understandings about pauper children, of children's experience of workhouse relief, and of what was the intended purpose of children's welfare under the Irish Poor Law. This thesis will show that the provision of poor relief for children was shaped by prevailing cultural constructs of childhood in Ireland and by how these constructs were applied to the workhouse child.

III: Childhood in the workhouse

The study of childhood in Ireland, as a cultural concept and as a period in the life-course, has emerged only recently as a subject of historical and interdisciplinary inquiry. In their introduction to *Children, Childhood, and Irish Society*, published in 2014, the editors Maria Luddy and James Smith noted that there had been 'little sustained engagement of this topic in an Irish context' and that, consequently, historians have a limited knowledge of how Irish society understood children and childhood, or of how these concepts evolved over time.²¹ In contrast, there has been considerable scholarship produced on childhood in British society, particularly on how adults perceived and understood children. Luddy and Smith have suggested that 'Irish

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Maria Luddy and James M. Smith, 'Introduction' in Maria Luddy and James M. Smith (eds), *Children, childhood and Irish society, 1500 to the present* (Dublin, 2014), pp 15-16.

Studies can benefit greatly from this research' because it can facilitate the examination of childhood in Ireland within a comparative context.²² The aspect of the historiography about childhood most relevant to this thesis relates to the inclusion of poor children within the middle-class ideal of childhood during the nineteenth century.

Most of the scholarship about the history of childhood in nineteenth-century Britain has been focused upon the construction of childhood as a social concept. Several historians have noted that the attachment by adults of significant symbolic and cultural meanings to children was productive of idealised and imagined childhoods which could bear little relation to children's actual experiences.²³ During the nineteenth-century, the middle-class ideal of childhood as a protected time of innocence and happiness became culturally dominant. In this construction, childhood was understood as a distinct period of the life-cycle focused upon the family, education, and contentedness, and was to be kept separated from the adult world of work and immoral influences. Fostered by a common literature with their British counterparts on the themes of children and childhood, this idealised concept of childhood was shared by much of middle-class society in Ireland.²⁴ In 1872, the *Cork Examiner* set out the 'essential conditions' of childhood as joy, happiness, dependency, parental love, moral purity, and an upbringing within a stable domestic home.²⁵ However, contemporaries understood that the experience of this ideal of childhood was dictated by social class. In 1911, an *Irish Times* article noted that, 'being able to look back upon a happy childhood' as 'a time of joyous days, when worry was unknown and the hours sped pleasantly' was 'the average middle-class man's recollection of his boyhood.'²⁶ Yet, at the same time, the article pointed out that this

²² Ibid., p. 16.

²³ See: Hugh Cunningham, *The children of the poor: representations of childhood since the seventeenth century* (Oxford, 1991); Carolyn Steedman, *Strange dislocations: childhood and the idea of human interiority, 1780-1930* (London, 1995); Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined orphans: poor families, child welfare, and contested citizenship in London* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2006).

²⁴ Virginia Crossman, 'Middle-class attitudes to poverty and welfare in post-Famine Ireland' in Fintan Lane (ed.), *Politics, society and the middle class in modern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp 130-47; Luddy and Smith, 'Introduction', p. 16.

²⁵ *Cork Examiner*, 21 Dec. 1867.

²⁶ *Irish Times*, 4 Mar. 1911.

middle-class childhood was not experienced by the children of the poor: ‘with the child of the slums it must be otherwise; at best his can be but a sombre existence, with fitful gleams of comfort.’²⁷

The contrast between the imagined childhood of the middle-class child and that of poorer children was decried by publicists and social commentators in Britain as unfair and contrary to the principle that children were not responsible for the circumstances of their upbringing.²⁸ Hugh Cunningham has noted that by the late nineteenth century, ‘all children were thought to be entitled to enjoyment of the experiences of what constituted “a proper childhood”’, and that this ideal precipitated ‘an acute sense of pity for the children of the poor, whose potential as children was counterposed to the drab realities which in fact confronted them.’²⁹ This conceptualisation of ‘a proper childhood’ was, in effect, the middle-class ideal of a happy and protected childhood which was extended to incorporate the children of the labouring classes.³⁰ In the contexts of poverty and the significance of children’s labour to the income of poorer families, this ideal of childhood would have been difficult for such families to fulfil.

Although middle-class society increasingly viewed poorer children as entitled to the same experience of childhood as the middle-class child, there was a concurrent dual imagining of poor children as victims in need of protection as well as threats in need of incarceration, discipline, and reform.³¹ Destitute children were viewed as a threat because of their perceived tendency towards criminality which was linked to the corruption of their morals by impure adult influences and the resultant loss of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cunningham, *The children of the poor*, pp 1-17, 97-8, 133-4.

²⁹ Ibid., pp 1, 134.

³⁰ See: Alan Richardson, ‘Romanticism and the end of childhood’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 21 (1999), p. 171; Murdoch, *Imagined orphans*, pp 43-8, 140; Ginger S. Frost, *Victorian childhoods* (Westport CT, 2009), pp 142-63; Shurlee Swain, ‘Sweet childhood lost: idealised images of childhood in the British child rescue literature’, *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 2 (2009), pp 199-200; Alysa Levene, *The childhood of the poor: welfare in eighteenth-century London* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp 1-20.

³¹ Harry Hendrick, *Child welfare: England, 1872-1989* (London, 1994), pp 2-14.

childhood innocence.³² Social anxiety concerning the threat of destitute children was particularly high during the 1850s in Britain due to the large numbers of street children in the expanding cities, and in Ireland on account of the thousands of children left orphaned and abandoned after the Great Famine.³³ This anxiety precipitated the establishment of various institutions for the welfare of destitute children in Ireland. These institutions, such as reformatories and industrial schools, partly sought to rescue poor children from the depravity of the streets, but they were also designed to protect society until such children were sufficiently reformed.³⁴ The dichotomy of victim and threat was evident in perceptions of children in the workhouses of the Irish Poor Law. In 1861, Denis O'Connor, a Medical Officer of the Cork workhouse, commented that while there was sympathy for the plight of the destitute child, '[t]he most unsatisfactory opinions prevail amongst the public as to the moral and intellectual culture of workhouse children.'³⁵ Children in the workhouses were represented as blameless for their destitution and therefore deserving of rescue from the pauperising influences of their parents, but they were also viewed as potentially delinquent and in need of moral reform through discipline and education.

Poor relief policies concerning the care of children were shaped by prevailing social perceptions of pauper children and by a desire to provide such children with the experience of a middle-class childhood. However, the childhood experience most deplored by social commentators in post-Famine Ireland was that of the thousands of children who were admitted into, and in many cases grew up within, the workhouses of the Irish Poor Law. The experience of the workhouse child was represented as the antithesis to a middle-class childhood because of the stigma of pauperism, the

³² Peter King, 'The rise of juvenile delinquency in England, 1780-1840: changing patterns of perception and prosecution', *Past and Present*, 160 (1998), pp 116-66; Heather Shore, *Artful dodgers: youth and crime in early nineteenth-century London* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp 1-14, 20-9.

³³ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 11-21.

³⁴ Maria Luddy, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995), pp 90-2; Women and philanthropy; Ian Miller, 'Constructing "Moral Hospitals": improving bodies and minds in Irish reformatories and industrial schools, c. 1851-1890' in Anne MacLellan and Alice Mauger (eds), *Growing pains: childhood illness in Ireland, 1750-1950* (Sallins, 2013), pp 105-22.

³⁵ Denis C. O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience of workhouse life: with suggestions for reforming the poor-law and its administration* (Dublin, 1861), p. 67.

experience of less eligibility, the apparent absence of joy, and the separation of families. For these reasons, in 1865, the *Cork Examiner* described the workhouse as, ‘the place of all others most irreconcilable with our notions of childhood.’³⁶ This view was also voiced by some poor relief officials. In 1914, for instance, the Local Government Board Lady Inspector, Aneenee Fitzgerald-Kenney, maintained that whereas ‘[o]ne of a child’s greatest assets is his childishness’, the workhouse regime allowed ‘no room for childishness’.³⁷ As this thesis will show, middle-class concerns about the experience of a workhouse childhood were a key motivation behind some of the attempts to reform children’s welfare under the Irish Poor Law.

We should remember that such representations of a workhouse childhood were the imaginings of adults and may not therefore have accurately reflected the real experiences of children. Within the historiography on childhood, there have been calls for a focus shift away from adult perceptions of children in favour of the perspectives of children themselves.³⁸ Poor relief records, as well as newspapers and the writings of social commentators, reveal little about children’s first-hand experiences of the workhouse. As a reflection of the administrative priorities behind the creation of poor relief records, children’s voices were either completely absent or paraphrased by an adult, and the accounts of their agency are usually limited to when they contravened rules and regulations in a workhouse.³⁹ The limitations of the available sources have meant that this thesis is focused upon adults’ understanding of children and childhood, and it is therefore a traditional study of childhood as a social construct rather than as a

³⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 25 Dec. 1865.

³⁷ *Forty-second annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 7561], H.C. 1914, xxxix, 595, p. 18.

³⁸ See: Hugh Cunningham, ‘Histories of childhood’, *The American Historical Journal*, 103 (1998), pp 1195-208; Lynn Abrams, ‘Lost childhoods: recovering children’s experiences of welfare in modern Scotland’ in Anthony Fletcher and Stephen Hussey (eds), *Childhood in question: children, parents and the state* (Manchester, 1999), pp 152-72; Harry Hendrick, ‘Age as a category of analysis in the history of childhood’ in Luddy and Smith (eds), *Children, childhood and Irish society*, pp 389-413; Johanna Sköld and Kaisa Vehkalahti, ‘Marginalised children: methodological and ethical issues in the history of education and childhood’, *History of Education*, 45 (2016), pp 403-10.

³⁹ Ian Grosvenor, ‘“Seen but not heard”: city childhoods from the past into the present’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 42 (2007), pp 405-29; Peter N. Stearns, ‘Challenges in the history of childhood’, *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1 (2008), pp 35-42.

genuine experience. Yet, the adult gaze of institutional sources is an advantage to the examination of how the social construction of childhood influenced the provision of child welfare.⁴⁰ Poor relief officials and social commentators may have possessed a limited understanding of the real experiences of children in the workhouses, but the ways in which they understood and perceived of a workhouse childhood informed the provision, development, and reform of children's welfare under the Irish Poor Law.

IV: Thesis outline

The provision of poor relief for children was multifaceted. This thesis is divided into eight thematic chapters which together chart children's range of interactions with the poor relief system in Ireland. Due to the small number of scholarly studies on children's welfare in the workhouses, and the focus of many of these studies upon particular areas of poor relief, the historiographies about the different aspects of poor relief provided for children are explored in the relevant chapters. Drawing upon the statistical returns published by the central poor relief authorities as well as upon the population figures from six workhouses, Chapter One presents a statistical analysis of the numbers of children in receipt of poor relief during the post-Famine era. This analysis details the variations between the populations of urban and rural workhouses, and it highlights the prolonged impact of the Great Famine upon the demography of pauper children. Chapter Two contextualises the place of statutory poor relief within the economy of makeshifts of families who adopted a variety of survival strategies to make ends meet. The range of family forms and circumstances in which children were admitted into the workhouses are examined in Chapter Three through a statistical analysis of the admission and discharge registers of four workhouses.

Chapter Four explores the ideology of pauper education and the standards of literacy attained by children in the workhouse schools. Despite the significance placed

⁴⁰ Kaisa Vehkalahti, 'Dusting the archives of childhood: child welfare records as historical sources', *History of Education*, 45 (2016), pp 434-7.

by contemporaries upon the education of pauper children, the reports by National Education inspectors indicated that low standards of literacy prevailed because of the parsimony of Boards of Guardians who hired inadequate numbers of qualified teachers. The Poor Law authorities placed greater emphasis upon industrial training than literacy education, however. Chapter Five details the gendered curriculum of industrial training received by boys and girls to prepare them for employment, and Chapter Six examines the hiring out system by which children were employed from the workhouses, usually as farm labourers or household servants.

Chapter Seven explores the provision of medical relief for sick children in the workhouse hospitals. It also investigates the extent of mortality and the spread of institution-related infectious diseases among children. Finally, Chapter Eight examines the observations noted by contemporaries on the demoralisation and institutionalisation of workhouse children whose lives were represented as incompatible with the experience of the middle-class ideal of childhood. The boarding out system of foster care was established partly to provide orphaned and abandoned children with a more 'natural' childhood, while alternative institutional modes of care were established for children who did not qualify for boarding out. Each of the above aspects of poor relief were interlinked and together comprised both the experience and cultural imagining of a workhouse childhood.

Chapter One

Children and poor relief: a statistical analysis

I: Introduction

During the post-Famine era, poor relief was received by thousands of poor children through an indoor relief system of workhouses and through the granting of outdoor relief to certain families entitled to receive assistance within their own homes. The Irish Poor Law was intended to operate uniformly across the country, but recent scholarly studies have highlighted the significance of regional and local contexts within which poor relief was administered and accessed. These studies have advanced our understanding of the regional variations in the numbers of recipients of relief during the post-Famine era. However, a need remains for a closer examination of poor relief statistics to assess variations in the receipt of relief by different sections of the destitute poor, particularly by children. This chapter undertakes a comparative statistical study of the numbers of children in receipt of relief in Ireland between 1850 and 1911.

This analysis takes both a national and local perspective through the examination of the statistical returns published by the central Poor Law authorities and of the returns related to the populations of six workhouse case studies, each situated within distinct social and economic contexts. The relative numbers of children in the populations of each workhouse reflected divergent local economic conditions, especially between urban and rural localities, as well as the local manifestations of national trends such as the medicalisation of the workhouse institutions during the nineteenth century. Due to the reported unwillingness of many families to seek admission into a workhouse, statistics related to the number of children in receipt of poor relief were not representative of the total number of children who were destitute or in need of relief in Ireland. Boards of Guardians held considerable discretion over the administration of their own Poor Law Unions, particularly in the provision of

outdoor relief. This chapter reveals that there were significant changes in the numbers of children in receipt of relief during the post-Famine era, and that the Great Famine had a prolonged effect upon the demography of children in the workhouses for more than a decade following the disaster.

II: Regional patterns of poor relief

Regional and local variations in the provision and receipt of relief are necessary considerations in any statistical analysis of poor relief in post-Famine Ireland. Regionalism and localism at the parish and Union level were defining characteristics in the operation of systems of poor relief in nineteenth-century Britain and Europe.¹ In the European context, Steven King has argued that developments in welfare practices before the twentieth century are most likely to be found through the examination of poor relief at the sub-national level since statutory welfare related legislation at the national level was often the codification of existing regional practices.² King suggests that a comparative regional approach should be applied in national level studies because this may reveal overlaps in the development of welfare policies and practices in different geographical areas.³ Regional and local comparative analyses of statutory welfare may therefore identify the existence of distinct ‘welfare regimes’ within a national framework.⁴

¹ For examples, see: Ole Peter Grell et al (eds), *Health care and poor relief in 18th and 19th century northern Europe* (Aldershot, 2002); Ole Peter Grell et al (eds), *Health care and poor relief in 18th and 19th century southern Europe* (Aldershot, 2005); Samantha Shave, *Pauper policies: Poor Law practice in England, 1780-1850* (Manchester, 2017); Bernard Harris, ‘Parsimony and pauperism: poor relief in England, Scotland and Wales in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 39 (2019), pp 40-74.

² Steven A. King, ‘Welfare regimes and welfare regions in Britain and Europe, c. 1750s to 1860s’, *Journal of Modern European History*, 9 (2011), pp 42-65

³ Ibid, pp 47-9; Steven A. King and John Stewart, ‘Welfare peripheries in modern Europe’ in Steven A. King and John Stewart (eds), *Welfare peripheries: the development of welfare in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe* (Bern, 2007), pp 9-38.

⁴ King, ‘Welfare regimes’, p. 63.

There were considerable regional variations in the operation of the New Poor Law of 1834 in England and Wales. This legislation sought to establish a greater degree of national uniformity in the provision of relief to the destitute poor, but recent research has revealed the New Poor Law to have been implemented as a patchwork of regional and local systems of relief across the country with a particular divergence between southern agrarian Unions and those in northern industrial cities.⁵ Regional economic differences were a key factor behind local variations in the provision of relief, but Alan Kidd has pointed out that much of the ‘mismatch between the intentions of the central authority and the interests of many localities’ was also ‘culturally determined’ by different notions of entitlement as well as the continuation of local customary relief practices.⁶ Such findings have highlighted the need to accommodate regional variations in the analysis of poor relief in Ireland.

Until recently, the historiography concerning the operation of the Irish Poor Law has focused upon the administration of relief policy at the national level. Furthermore, much of our understanding of how the relief system operated in Ireland is specific to its failure during the Great Famine. The sesquicentennial of the disaster during the 1990s occasioned the publication of numerous local studies about the administration of famine relief within individual workhouses during the crisis, but

⁵ Steven A. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700-1850: a regional perspective* (Manchester, 2000), pp 257, 266; Keith D. M. Snell, *Parish and belonging: community, identity, and welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950* (Cambridge, 2009), pp 212, 228-30, 232-3. See also: Andrew Hinde and Francis Turnbull, ‘The populations of two Hampshire workhouses, 1851-61’, *Local Population Studies*, 61 (1998), pp 38-53; Nigel Goose, ‘Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century: the case of Hertfordshire’, *Local Population Studies*, 62 (1999), pp 52-69; David G. Jackson, ‘Kent workhouse populations in 1881: a study based on the census enumerators’ books’, *Local Population Studies*, 69 (2002), pp 51-66; David G. Jackson, ‘The Medway Union workhouse, 1876-1881: a study based on the admission and discharge registers and the census enumerators’ books’, *Local Population Studies*, 75 (2005), pp 11-32; Audrey Perkyns, ‘The admission of children to the Milton Union workhouse, Kent, 1835-1885’, *Local Population Studies*, 80 (2008), pp 59-77; Christine Seal, ‘Workhouse populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions: a study based on the census enumerators’ books, 1851-1911’, *Family and Community History*, 13 (2010), pp 83-100; Andy Gritt and Peter Park, ‘The workhouse populations of Lancashire in 1881’, *Local Population Studies*, 86 (2011), pp 37-65; Lewis Darwen, ‘Workhouse populations of the Preston Union, 1841-61’, *Local Population Studies*, 93 (2014), pp 35-53; Johanna Purser, ‘The workhouse population of the Nottingham Union, 1881-1882’, *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp 66-80.

⁶ Alan Kidd, *State, society and the poor in nineteenth-century England* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp 12, 30.

these studies rarely situated their findings within a wider regional or national context.⁷ While this preoccupation with the ‘horrendous failure’ of the poor relief system during the Great Famine was understandable, Virginia Crossman has noted that a consequence has been that, ‘[o]ur knowledge of a system that lasted from 1838 until 1925 is thus largely based on information about how it operated during an exceptional five-year period.’⁸ Moreover, the lack of investigation into the operation of the relief system beyond the Great Famine resulted in the absence of an Irish dimension to the development of comparative regional approaches to the study of poor relief.⁹ Yet, this absence of an established national model for the operation of the Irish Poor Law has enabled the application of a comparative regional approach from the outset in more recent scholarly studies of poor relief during the post-Famine era.

In research published within the past decade, three distinct welfare regimes have been identified as having operated in the northern, southern, and western regions of Ireland during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This tri-partite framework divided the 163 Poor Law Unions into separate regional groupings. The northern region was comprised of 40 Poor Law Unions which covered the whole of Ulster bar the western seaboard of Donegal. A peripheral western region of 39 Poor Law Unions stretched along the coast from northwest Donegal down to southwest Kerry. Finally, an expansive southern region incorporated 84 Poor Law Unions that included Dublin and ranged from the midlands to Cork.¹⁰ These regional welfare

⁷ For examples of famine workhouse studies see: Eva Ó Cathaoir, ‘The poor-law in County Wicklow’ in Ken Harrington and William Nolan (eds), *Wicklow: history and society* (Dublin, 1994); Rita Byrne, ‘The workhouse in Waterford City, 1847-49’ in Des Cowman and Donald Brady (eds), *The Famine in Waterford, 1845-1850* (Dublin, 1995), pp 119-36; Ignatius Murphy, *A people starved: life and death in West Clare 1845-1851* (Dublin, 1996); Gerard MacAtasney, *This dreadful visitation: the Famine in Lurgan/Portadown* (Belfast, 1997); Seamus O’Brien, *Famine and community in Mullingar poor-law union 1845-49: mud huts and fat bullocks* (Dublin, 1999).

⁸ Gray, *The making of the Irish Poor Law*, p. 333; V. Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power in late nineteenth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006), p. 2.

⁹ Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland*, pp 59-60.

¹⁰ Mel Cousins, *Poor relief in Ireland, 1851-1914* (Oxford, 2011); Olwen Purdue, ‘Poor relief in the north of Ireland, 1850-1921’ in Virginia Crossman and Peter Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland, 1838-1948* (Dublin, 2011), pp 23-36; Donnacha S. Lucey, ‘Poor relief in the west of Ireland, 1861-1911’ in Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and welfare*, pp 37-52; Georgina Laragy, ‘Poor relief in

regimes aligned closely with the regional characteristics that have been identified more generally within the economic and political historiographies of Ireland.¹¹ Such regional economic and social characteristics became increasingly pronounced and visible in Ireland over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century and were a key factor as to why 'post-Famine Ireland seemed like a different country' when compared to the situation before 1845.¹²

In the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine, regional variations were caused primarily by the relative impact and longevity of the disaster in different areas. The Great Famine is recognised as having affected all parts of the country, including Ulster which 'suffered the effects of the Famine ... in ways that belied its arguably superior economy', but the chronology of the crisis varied with the worst of the disaster having passed in northern areas by 1848 even as conditions in the southern and western regions continued to deteriorate until 1850.¹³ In the decades following the crisis, the northern region was characterised by far greater industrialisation and urbanisation, particularly in Belfast and its surrounding hinterland, than in the rest of Ireland as well as by a complex and mixed religious geography.¹⁴ The economy of the southern region was dominated by commercial pastoral agriculture which had largely replaced tillage farming. Rural land values in this region were generally the highest in Ireland but the region also included highly populated areas of low-value ratings in Dublin where 'suburbanisation and inner city poverty reduced the tax base' for the relief of poverty in the centre of the city.¹⁵ The western region, 'associated with the most appalling deprivations', continued to experience periodic subsistence crises through the late nineteenth century as smallholding persisted and economic deprivation was

the south of Ireland, 1850-1921' in Crossman and Gray, *Poverty and welfare*, pp 53-66; Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 63-138.

¹¹ See, Leon Litvack and Glen Hooper, 'Introduction' in Leon Litvack and Glen Hooper (eds), *Ireland in the nineteenth century: regional identity* (Dublin, 2000), p. 9.

¹² Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 12.

¹³ Litvack and Hooper, p. 9; Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland*, pp 19-37.

¹⁴ Purdue, 'Poor relief in the north of Ireland', pp 23-4.

¹⁵ Laragy, 'Poor relief in the south of Ireland', pp 53-4; Hugh Clout, 'Streets broad and narrow: reflections on the urban history of Ireland and England', *Journal of Urban History*, 29 (2003), pp 504-12.

accompanied by outbreaks of political and agrarian agitation.¹⁶ During the 1880s, the western region was officially recognised as a particularly poor and underdeveloped economic area under the guise of the Congested Districts Board. The isolation of western island communities caused especial hardships for the resident poor who faced logistical difficulties in accessing poor relief on the mainland.¹⁷

As demonstrated by Crossman, the regional variations in the administration and receipt of poor relief during the post-Famine era become readily apparent when the ratios of relief recipients in the population of each Poor Law Union are mapped across the country for 1861 and 1901.¹⁸ Crossman's comparison of the ratios of indoor relief recipients to the populations of each Poor Law Union for both these years shows that indoor relief was accessed to a greater extent around Dublin and across a band of the country between Limerick and Cork. In contrast, indoor relief in Ulster and Connaught was accessed by relatively fewer persons in 1861 and 1901, although the numbers of relief recipients had increased in several Poor Law Unions in southeast Ulster and eastern Connaught by 1901. Except for around Limerick, most Poor Law Unions along the western periphery of the country had some of the lowest numbers of indoor relief recipients in both 1861 and 1901. These regional differences were partly a reflection of disparities in the level of rateable wealth, and therefore the amount of relief which Boards of Guardians were able to afford, with low levels of rateable wealth in the west in contrast to above average valuations in the southern region.¹⁹ The value of rateable wealth did not always correspond with the expenditures of Boards of Guardians, however. Many Poor Law Unions in Ulster had above average levels of rateable wealth but below average levels of expenditure.²⁰ This disparity reflected the stricter fiscal ideologies and policies of some Ulster Boards of Guardians,

¹⁶ Litvack and Hooper, p. 9; Lucey, 'Poor relief in the west of Ireland', pp 37-8; Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Cambridge, 1995), pp 67-9.

¹⁷ For example, see: Clifden Board of Guardians Minute Book, March 1863. GCCA, GPL3/28.

¹⁸ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 54-60.

¹⁹ Cousins, *Poor relief in Ireland*, pp 33-43.

²⁰ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 54-5.

as well as the greater availability of employment in the northern region which reduced the numbers of persons reliant upon poor relief.²¹

Regional differences in the fiscal ideologies of Boards of Guardians is most apparent in the mapping of outdoor relief recipients for 1861 and 1901 respectively.²² In 1861, the provision of outdoor relief was limited to areas in the southern region around Dublin, Kilkenny, and Waterford. By 1901, however, the provision of outdoor relief had expanded greatly, particularly in southwestern Poor Law Unions as well as in those along most of the western seaboard. The number of outdoor relief recipients also increased to a smaller extent in eastern Ulster but overall the northern region remained characterised by low levels of outdoor relief. Ulster Boards of Guardians appear to have been more ideologically opposed to outdoor relief than their western counterparts.²³ Additionally, indebted western Boards of Guardians may have considered it more financially expedient to replace indoor relief with outdoor relief as the primary form of assistance for the destitute poor on the basis that it was cheaper to grant a small subsidy towards an existing family income than to provide for the total support of an entire family within the workhouses.²⁴ The relatively small numbers of indoor relief recipients in western regions was therefore not indicative of low levels of pauperism. Thus, while there were national trends in the numbers of persons in receipt of relief during the post-Famine era, inter-regional differences in the administration and receipt of outdoor relief became more pronounced through this period, especially between Ulster and the rest of Ireland.

The discretionary power of Boards of Guardians meant that, 'no two unions carried out the same relief procedures.'²⁵ There were significant intra-regional variations in the administration of relief. For example, Olwen Purdue has identified a

²¹ Purdue, 'Poor relief in the north of Ireland', pp 23-35.

²² Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 58.

²³ Purdue, 'Poor relief in the north of Ireland', pp 23-35.

²⁴ Lucey, 'Poor relief in the west of Ireland', pp 37-52.

²⁵ Dymrna McLoughlin, 'Superfluous and unwanted deadweight: the emigration of nineteenth-century pauper women' in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.), *Irish women and Irish migration* (London, 1995), p. 68.

geographical divide between Boards of Guardians in northeast Ulster who exhibited a relatively liberal outlook to the provision of outdoor relief in contrast to the more conservative ethos among Boards of Guardians in southwest Ulster.²⁶ Furthermore, Poor Law Unions located in the urban centres of Belfast and Dublin had more characteristics in common regarding the administration of relief and the causes of poverty than they had with the rural areas of their respective regions. Indeed, Purdue has argued that this urban-rural divide was ‘possibly the clearest line of demarcation which can be drawn in terms of the development of welfare practices in late nineteenth-century Ireland.’²⁷ This chapter examines the extent to which the numbers of children in receipt of poor relief reflected the regional and urban-rural variations that historians have observed in the statistics for the total population in receipt of relief. The analysis begins with an examination of outdoor relief before turning to a study of the numbers of children in the workhouses.

III: Children and outdoor relief

Outdoor relief has received considerably less scholarly attention than relief within the workhouse.²⁸ The relative neglect of outdoor relief is due in part to the greater body of records which pertain to indoor relief, but it is also a reflection of the cultural primacy of the workhouse institution. Under the original legislation of 1838, the poor relief system was established as an ‘exclusive workhouse system’ under which the destitute poor could apply for relief only within purpose-built workhouses.²⁹ During the Great Famine, however, the overcrowding and high rates of morbidity and mortality among workhouse inmates revealed the limitations of an exclusively indoor relief system during a period of crisis. Boards of Guardians were therefore empowered

²⁶ Purdue, ‘Poor relief in the north of Ireland’, pp 23-35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁸ For an overview of outdoor relief, see: Cousins, *Poor relief in Ireland*, pp 18-22, 33-43; Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 63-100.

²⁹ William N. Hancock, ‘The difference between the English and Irish poor law as to the treatment of women and unemployed workmen’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 3 (1862), pp 217-18.

under the Poor Law Extension Act of 1847 to offer outdoor relief in the form of cooked food when a workhouse was either full or the site of infectious disease. Outdoor relief was provided to the greatest extent in the worst famine affected areas in the south and west. Additionally, families who were deemed particularly deserving, such as those with a sick or disabled head of household or those of widows with two or more legitimate children, qualified under the 1847 legislation to receive outdoor relief even if a workhouse was neither full nor the site of infectious disease.

Many Boards of Guardians viewed even this limited introduction of outdoor relief as a ‘new and hazardous experiment’, which undermined the deterrent effects of the workhouse test, and which was susceptible to abuse and fraudulent claims by the poor.³⁰ In their annual report for 1849, the Poor Law Commissioners, who were similarly wary of outdoor relief, stated that, ‘the abuses incidental to out-door relief ... are not to be contended with by any administrative agency’.³¹ The Commissioners alleged that outdoor relief was viewed with suspicion by ratepayers among whom ‘the force of opinion almost universally prevalent’ was ‘in favour of administering relief to the poor ... in the Workhouse’.³² Most Boards of Guardians withdrew the provision of outdoor relief as soon as famine related pressure upon their workhouses had abated. However, Crossman notes that these decisions to withdraw outdoor relief were based upon ‘subjective rather than objective assessment’ and ‘personal feeling rather than rational need’.³³ As a proportion of the total number relief recipients, persons in receipt of outdoor relief had fallen from 71.6 per cent in 1847-48 to 1.9 per cent in 1851-52. By 1852, the Poor Law Commissioners thus reported that, ‘the transition from out-door to in-door relief may be said to be complete throughout Ireland.’³⁴ By

³⁰ Alexander Thom, *Statistics of Ireland, from Thom's Irish almanac and official directory for 1849* (Dublin, 1849), pp 142-3.

³¹ *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1118], H.C. 1849, xxv, 87, p 13.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³³ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 63,

³⁴ *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1530], H.C. 1852, xxvi, 547, pp 4-5.

the early 1850s, the poor relief system had reverted almost entirely into an exclusive workhouse system.

The attitudes of the poor relief authorities towards outdoor relief began to liberalise from the 1860s. Although concerns about the potential for outdoor relief to demoralise the poor persisted, it was increasingly provided as a form of non-pauperising relief for the deserving poor as it did not involve the stigmatisms associated with admission into a workhouse. Statistics published in the annual reports of the central poor relief authorities recorded that between 1860-61 and 1870-71, the average daily number of outdoor relief recipients steadily increased from 2,654 to 21,474. This represented an increase from 5.8 per cent to 30.9 per cent of the total average daily number of recipients of all forms of poor relief. A sharper increase occurred between 1879 and 1881 when the average daily number of outdoor relief recipients rose from 39,629 to 60,883. By 1881, persons in receipt of outdoor relief accounted for 53.1 per cent of the average daily number of poor relief recipients. Between 1886 and 1907, outdoor relief consistently accounted for between 57.0 per cent and 63.0 per cent of the average daily number of poor relief recipients. However, the liberalisation of outdoor relief was not uniform across the country. Several studies on the administration of outdoor relief have shown that its liberalisation was concentrated in the southern and western regions and tended to correlate with the election of politically nationalist Poor Law Guardians and the continuation of periodic subsistence crises during which outdoor relief was used as the primary form of relief.³⁵ Thus, from at least the early 1880s, the Irish Poor Law was administered as a mixed system of indoor and outdoor relief.

³⁵ For a discussion of outdoor relief as a response to subsistence crises see, Crossman, ““With the experience of 1846 and 1847 before them””, pp 167-82. For a discussion on the politicisation of outdoor relief see, Virginia Crossman, ‘The New Ross workhouse riot of 1887: nationalism, class and the Irish poor laws’, *Past and Present*, 179 (2003), pp 135-58; Virginia Crossman and Donnacha S. Lucey, ““One huge abuse”: the Cork Board of Guardians and the expansion of outdoor relief in post-Famine Ireland’, *English Historical Review*, 126 (2011), pp 1408-29; William L. Feingold, *The revolt of the tenantry: the transformation of local government in Ireland, 1872-1886* (Boston, 1984).

The low incidence of surviving outdoor relief registers for individual Poor Law Unions necessitates a reliance upon national statistics for the numbers of children in receipt of outdoor relief. In the statistical returns published in the annual reports of the central poor relief authorities, children consistently accounted for a larger percentage of outdoor relief recipients than they did among indoor relief recipients during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. During in the period March-September 1851, children accounted for 45.1 per cent of outdoor relief recipients and they continued to account for similarly high percentages over the following decades: 40.8 per cent in March-September 1861, 42.8 per cent in March-September 1871, and 42.9 per cent in March-September 1881. Children accounted for lower percentages of outdoor relief recipients during the late nineteenth century, however: 34.7 per cent in March-September 1891 and 29.5 per cent in March-September 1901. This decline coincided with the liberalisation of outdoor relief by many Boards of Guardians and therefore indicates that this liberalisation was primarily directed towards the relief of adults.

Whether a family was eligible for outdoor relief was dependent upon the circumstances of the head of household. A child's family may have received outdoor relief if the head of household was either permanently or temporarily disabled through illness or injury, or if the head of household was a widow with at least two legitimate children. Table 1 details the number of children whose families were in receipt of outdoor relief during the half-year periods of each census year between 1850-51 and 1900-01, along with a percentage breakdown of the range of circumstances for which families qualified to receive outdoor relief. The aggregate figures for the total number of children show that the smallest number of children received outdoor relief in 1860-61 but their numbers had increased significantly by 1880-81 before declining during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Among children whose families received outdoor relief on account of a temporarily or permanently disabled head of household, those with a disabled father consistently and greatly outnumbered those with a disabled mother. The greater percentages represented by children with disabled

Table 1: The family circumstances of children in receipt of outdoor relief, 1850-51 – 1900-01

Half-year ended:	Father permanently disabled	Father temporarily disabled	Mother permanently disabled	Mother temporarily disabled	Widow with two or more legitimate children	Children relieved in asylums	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	n. %
1851 Mar. 25	12.1	26.2	5.7	14.2	41.4	0.4	10,526 100.0
1851 Sep. 29	10.5	23.7	7.4	16.0	42.1	0.3	16,127 100.0
1861 Mar. 25	2.9	51.0	1.5	16.4	28.1	0.1	3,903 100.0
1861 Sep. 29	3.0	47.6	1.7	19.5	28.1	0.1	3,776 100.0
1871 Mar. 25	5.4	45.9	1.4	10.8	36.4	0.1	14,984 100.0
1871 Sep. 29	4.8	45.6	1.4	11.9	36.2	0.1	15,041 100.0
1881 Mar. 25	7.4	51.4	1.2	7.9	32.1	0.0	43,722 100.0
1881 Sep. 29	7.1	46.1	1.4	9.4	35.9	0.1	39,440 100.0
1891 Mar. 25	7.7	41.4	1.8	7.3	41.7	0.1	28,890 100.0
1891 Sep. 29	7.5	43.9	1.5	8.2	38.8	0.1	28,610 100.0
1901 Mar. 31	7.2	33.3	1.2	6.9	51.2	0.2	20,401 100.0
1901 Sep. 30	7.6	30.4	1.2	7.1	53.4	0.3	19,960 100.0

Source: Annual reports of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland, 1851-72, and of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1873-1902

fathers reflected the financial consequences to a family caused by the loss of a father's wages. The larger percentages represented by children with a disabled mother as their head of household in 1850-51 and 1860-61 than in later years may have been an effect of the Great Famine as some of these women were potentially those whose husbands had either died or emigrated during the crisis. Most of the children with their mother as their head of households were the children of widows with at least two legitimate children. This category accounted for large percentages of children in receipt of outdoor relief in 1850-51, 1890-91, and 1900-01.

The stipulation for a widow to have at least two legitimate children to qualify for outdoor relief highlighted the legislators' expectation that a widow was able to support a single child without assistance. This expectation was criticised by the social commentator William Hancock as inconsistent with middle-class ideals of domesticity and as beyond the economic capacity of many widows, the admission of widows with children into the workhouses cited as evidence. Hancock argued that although the Irish Poor Law treated women 'as being as regular labourers for wages as men, and as equally bound to support themselves and their children; ... applying pressure to the women has not increased their ability to support themselves.'³⁶ According to Hancock, women should instead have been treated as dependents to reflect 'the spontaneous and universal recognition of the principle that women ought naturally to be supported by men.'³⁷ Yet, for destitute widows with one legitimate child, as well as for those with two or more legitimate children in Unions where Boards of Guardians did not provide outdoor relief at all, the workhouse was the only form of poor relief available to them. Arguing that more support should be provided to widows by the poor relief authorities, the social reformer Isabella Tod stated in 1881 that, 'it is indeed astonishing to see how many women do manage to do the duty of both parents to their children with little or

³⁶ William N. Hancock, 'The workhouse as a mode of relief for widows and orphans', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 1 (1855), pp 84-5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

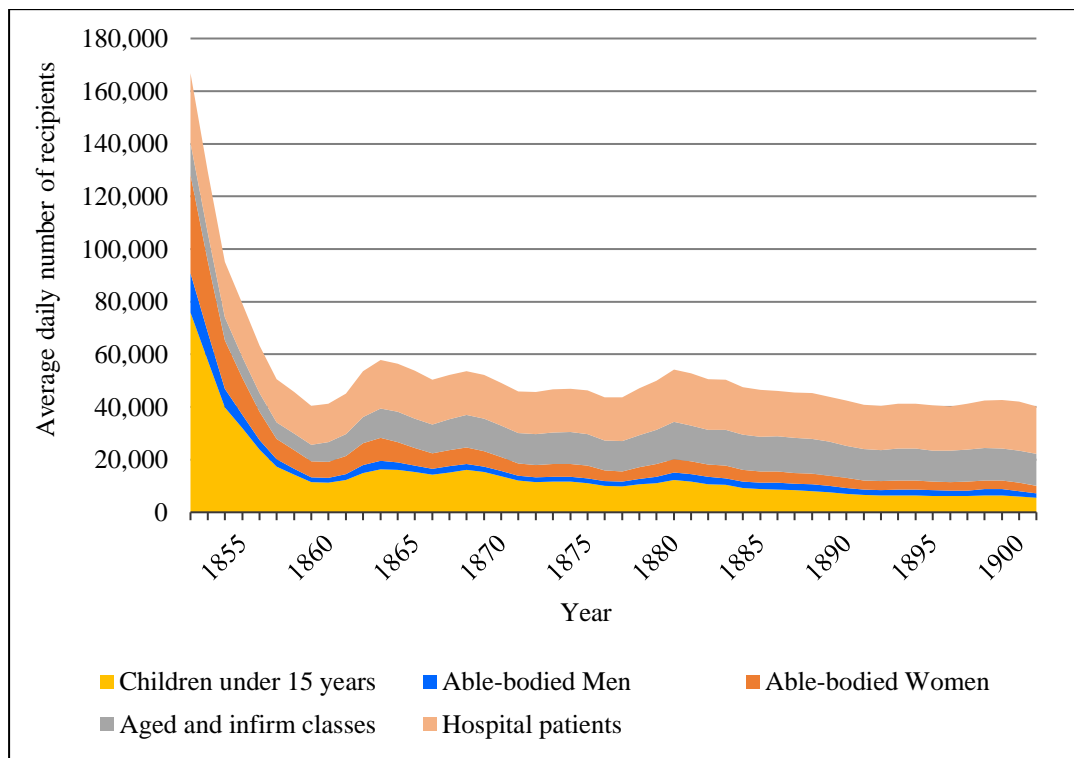
no help.’³⁸ Unmarried mothers were deemed undeserving of outdoor relief regardless of their number of children.

IV: Children and indoor relief

Families who did not qualify for outdoor relief could instead access relief only by way of admission into a workhouse. The official statistical returns for the numbers of indoor relief recipients at the national level indicate that the demographics of the workhouse populations changed significantly over the second half of the nineteenth century. These changes are illustrated in Figure 2 which shows the average daily number of indoor relief recipients, and the relative percentages represented by each class of recipient, between 1852 and 1901. Indicative of the continued pressure upon the relief system at the close of the Great Famine in 1852, the total average daily number of workhouse inmates was 166,821 which was far higher than at any other point during the post-Famine era. During the 1850s, the workhouse population declined rapidly with the passing of famine conditions and reached its lowest level of 40,380 in 1859. There were subsequent peaks in the population in both 1862-63 and 1880-81 which corresponded to periods of economic distress and subsistence crises in the southern and western regions especially. These peaks aside, there was a gradual downward trend in the average daily number of indoor relief recipients from the mid-1860s until the end of the century.

Within these aggregate figures, different trends are apparent in the average daily numbers of each category of inmate. At the end of the Great Famine in 1852, the average daily number of 75,961 children accounted for the largest single demographic group within the workhouses and 45.5 per cent of the total inmate population. Children were overrepresented in the workhouse population. In, the 1851

³⁸ Isabella Tod, ‘The place of women in the administration of the Irish Poor Law’, *Englishwoman’s Review*, 103 (1881), p. 481.

Figure 2: The average daily number of indoor relief recipients, 1852-1901

Source: *Annual reports of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland, 1852-72, and of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1873-1902*

census, children accounted for only 35.0 per cent of the population of Ireland.³⁹ The Great Famine precipitated an overrepresentation of children in the workhouses during much of the 1850s. Children comprised 40.2 per cent of inmates in 1855, but their number had decreased to 11,216 by 1860 which represented 27.2 per cent of inmates. In 1860, the Poor Law Commissioners stated that they could not, ‘anticipate any further annual decrease of pauperism from the cause which has for many years past influenced it – namely the continued subsidence of the effect of the famine’, and that any subsequent rise or fall in the number workhouse inmates was, ‘solely dependent on the favourable or adverse character of the respective years.’⁴⁰ A closer examination

³⁹ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 11-14.

⁴⁰ *Thirteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2654], H.C. 1860, xxxvii, 327, p. 4.

into the reasons for the relatively slow decline in the number of children in the workhouses during the first post-Famine decade is conducted later in this chapter. In line with the aggregate numbers of relief recipients, the number of children increased during periods of distress in the early 1860s and to a lesser extent in 1880-81, but gradually decreased thereafter until they accounted for only 13.1 per cent of inmates in 1901.

In contrast to the large percentages represented by children at the end of the Great Famine, able-bodied men and women accounted for only 8.9 per cent and 22.4 per cent respectively in 1852. The percentage of able-bodied men declined subsequently to 4.9 per cent in 1861 and fluctuated marginally around this level until 1901. The Poor Law Commissioners attributed the relatively low numbers of able-bodied men to the deterrent effects of the workhouse institutions; they claimed that, 'it is clear from the figures entered under the head of "able-bodied" ... that the Irish workhouse operates with sufficient stringency as a test of destitution in this latter branch of pauperism.'⁴¹ The number of able-bodied women decreased from 8,589 in 1863 to 2,890 in 1901 which, as a percentage of the total average number of inmates, represented a decline from 14.8 per cent to 7.2 per cent. Able-bodied women tended to outnumber able-bodied men by a ratio of roughly three to one until the mid-1860s and by about two to one from thereon which reflected the greater susceptibility of women to poverty and the opposition of Boards of Guardians to the relief of able-bodied men.

Whereas the percentages of children and able-bodied adults decreased over the post-Famine era, there were considerable increases in the percentages of inmates classed as either aged and infirm or as hospital patients. In 1852, the aged and infirm class and hospital patients respectively accounted for 7.3 per cent and 15.9 per cent of workhouse inmates. By 1861, however, these percentages had increased to 18.5 per cent for the aged and infirm and 34.1 per cent for hospital patients. These classes

⁴¹ *Fourteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2803], H.C. 1861, xxviii, 305, p. 11.

dominated the workhouse populations of the late nineteenth century. In 1901, the aged and infirm represented 30.2 per cent of inmates and a further 44.7 per cent were hospital patients. The increased representation of these classes within the workhouses reflected the changing role of the workhouse towards that of a hospital, the wider medicalisation of the Irish Poor Law, and the greater significance of sickness and old age as causes of destitution in post-Famine Ireland. It is probable that children comprised a large proportion of hospital patients, but the official statistical returns included no breakdown of the ages of persons in this class.⁴²

Although statistics for the average daily number of indoor relief recipients are helpful in the identification of long-term trends in the demography of the workhouse population, this measurement masks short-term and seasonal fluctuations in the numbers in receipt of indoor relief. The numbers of workhouse inmates during the post-Famine era tended to peak during the ‘critical season’ of January and February which was followed by a gradual decline ‘with commencement of spring work’ before reaching a low in late-August with the higher demand for agricultural labour during the harvest.⁴³ These seasonal fluctuations were most pronounced within rural workhouse populations but they were reported to have occurred also in the populations of urban workhouses on account of the migration of agricultural labourers and their families into cities in search of work during the winter.⁴⁴ Urban workhouse populations also increased during cyclical depressions in trade and construction.⁴⁵

In 1853, the Poor Law Commissioners observed that the above seasonal pattern represented a change from the pre-Famine trend when inmate numbers had peaked during the ‘hungry’ summer months before the potato harvest.⁴⁶ This seasonal shift in

⁴² See: Chapter Seven, pp 224-33.

⁴³ *Eleventh annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2397], H.C. 1857-58, xxviii, 294, p. 4.

⁴⁴ For example, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1880. NAI, BG/78/A/73.

⁴⁵ Mary Daly, *Dublin, the deposed capital: an economic and social history, 1860-1914* (Cork, 1984), pp 55-64, 83-92.

⁴⁶ *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1645], H.C. 1852-53, I, 159, p. 4.

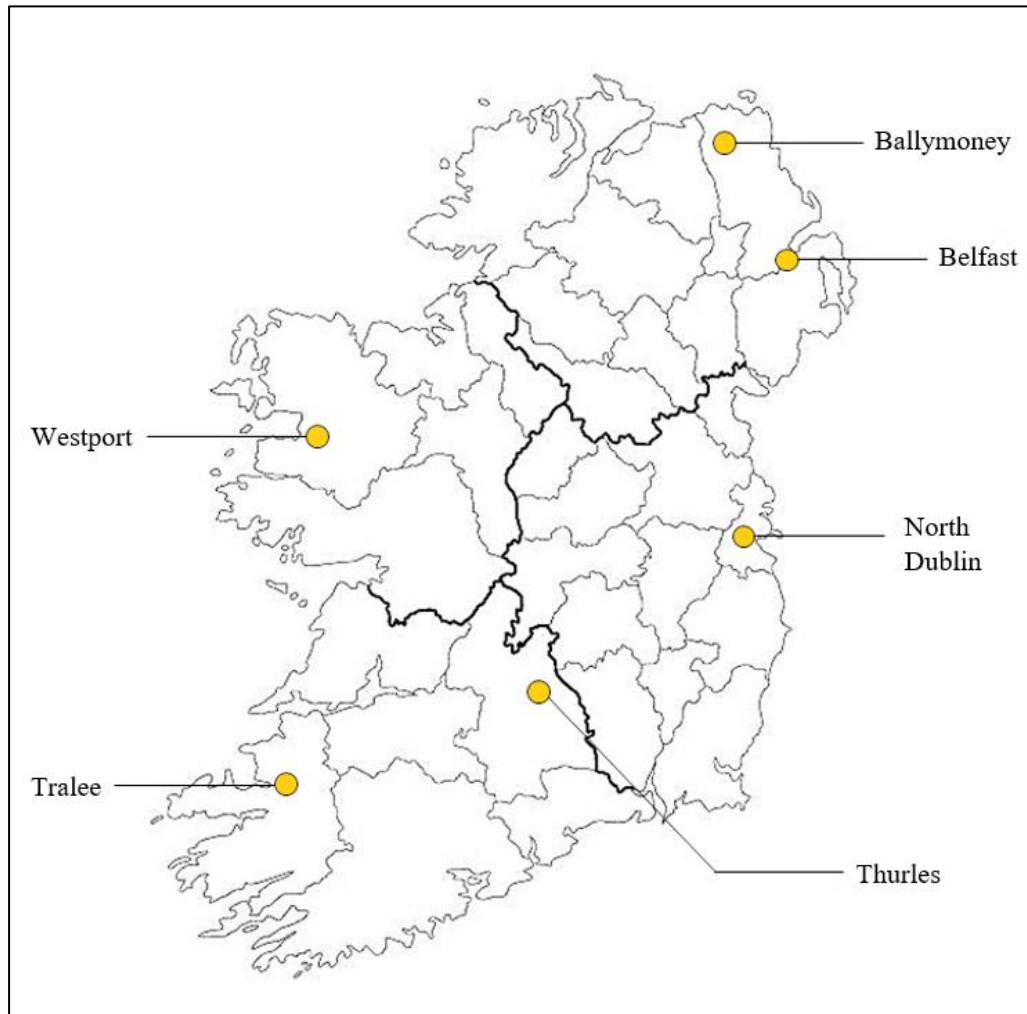
indoor relief applications was one outcome of the transition from smallholding subsistence potato farming towards waged agricultural labour and pastoral farming. The decline of subsistence farming also meant that disease during late winter and early spring became more significant in the ebb and flow of workhouse populations. As early as 1853, the Commissioners noted that, ‘the greatest amount of pauperism and the greatest degree of sickness now occur at the same season of the year’, which implied that disease had become a principal cause of destitution in post-Famine Ireland.⁴⁷ Short-term factors also affected population levels. Inmate numbers remained high due to severe weather in the spring of 1858 and during an agricultural depression during the summer of 1859.⁴⁸ Fluctuations in the inmate numbers of individual workhouses were therefore caused by range of potential long-term and short-term economic factors which operated at the national, regional, and local levels.

The inmate populations of six workhouse case studies will now be examined for variations in the numbers of children in receipt of indoor relief. The case studies are comprised of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, Thurles, Tralee, and Westport workhouses. These workhouses were selected to ensure that all four provinces and all three welfare regions, as well as a mixture of rural and urban localities, were represented in the analysis. The geographical locations of the case studies are illustrated in Figure 3. The northern region is represented by the workhouses of Ballymoney and Belfast, the southern region by North Dublin and Thurles, and the peripheral western region by Tralee and Westport. Whereas the workhouses in Ballymoney, Thurles, Tralee, and Westport were all situated in a range of rural settings, the Belfast and North Dublin workhouses were predominately urban. As these case studies were representative of only a small fraction of the total number of 163 workhouses in operation, this analysis should be read as an exploratory study

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ For an example of an increase in the number of workhouse inmates caused by bad weather see, Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1858. PRONI, BG/1/A/7.

Figure 3: Geographical locations of the six workhouse case studies within the provinces of Ireland



to determine whether inter- and intra-regional variations were apparent in the numbers of children in receipt of indoor relief in post-Famine Ireland.

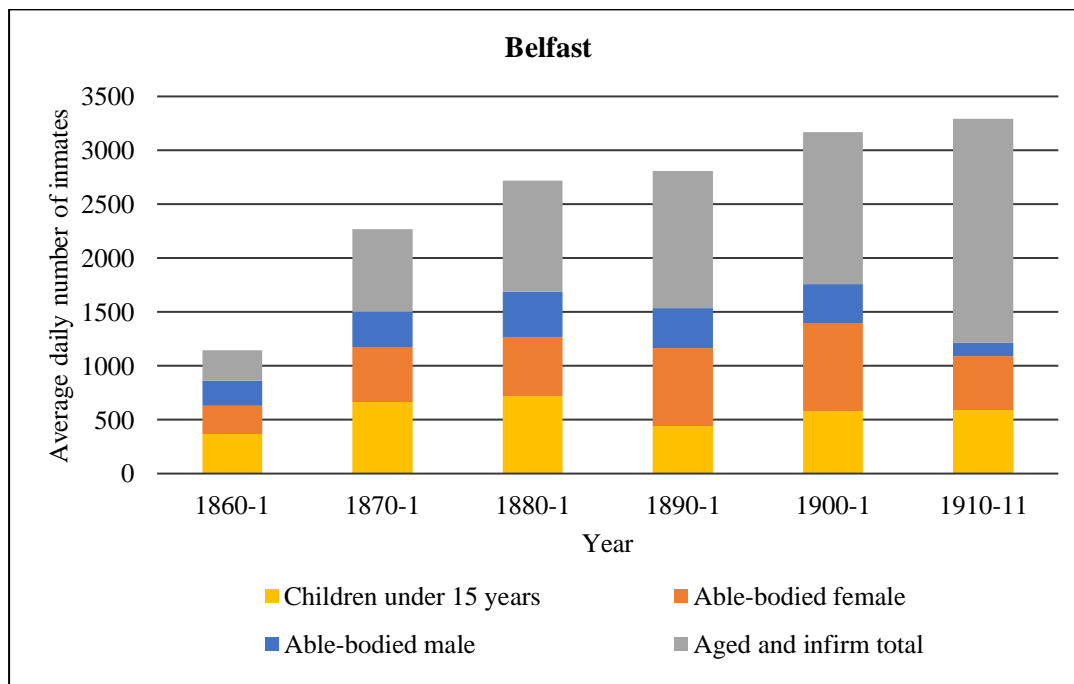
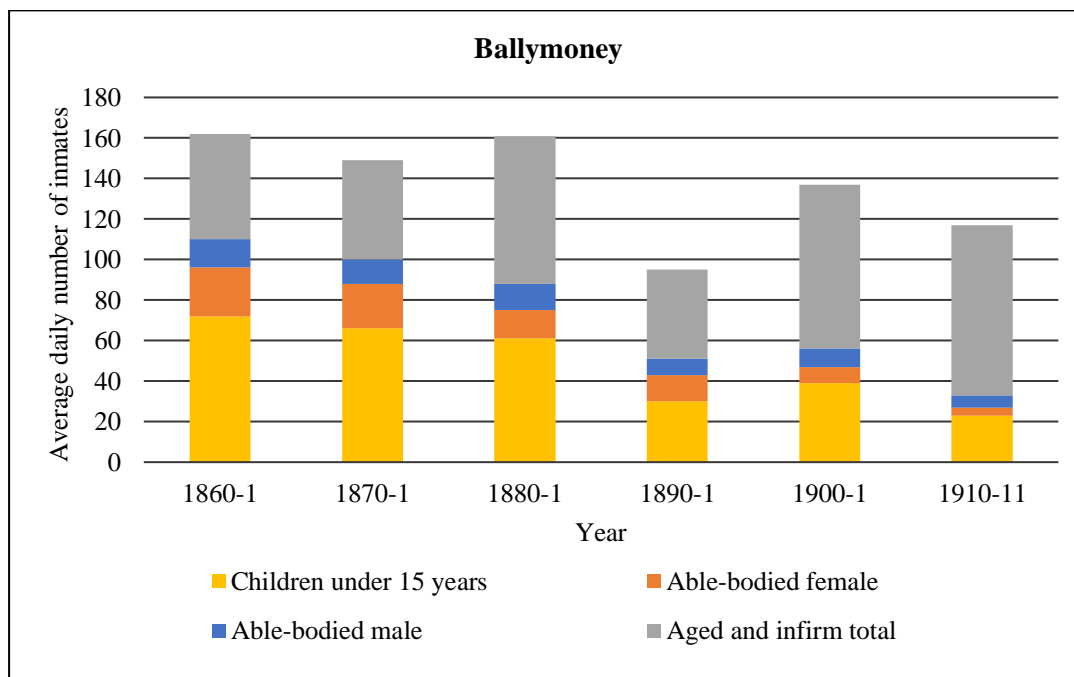
The average daily numbers of indoor relief recipients in the six case studies during each census year between 1860-61 and 1910-11 are illustrated in Figure 4. For each year under consideration, the relevant statistical returns were examined for a twelve-month period from October to September inclusive which aligned with the Irish Poor Law administrative year. When the statistical returns for a particular census year

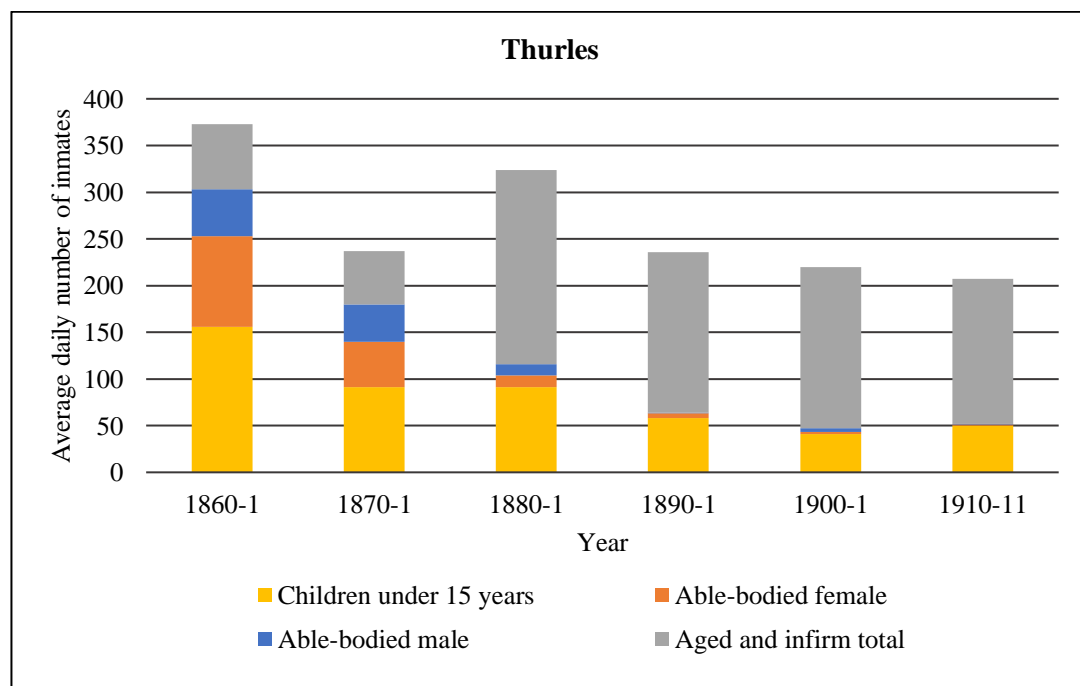
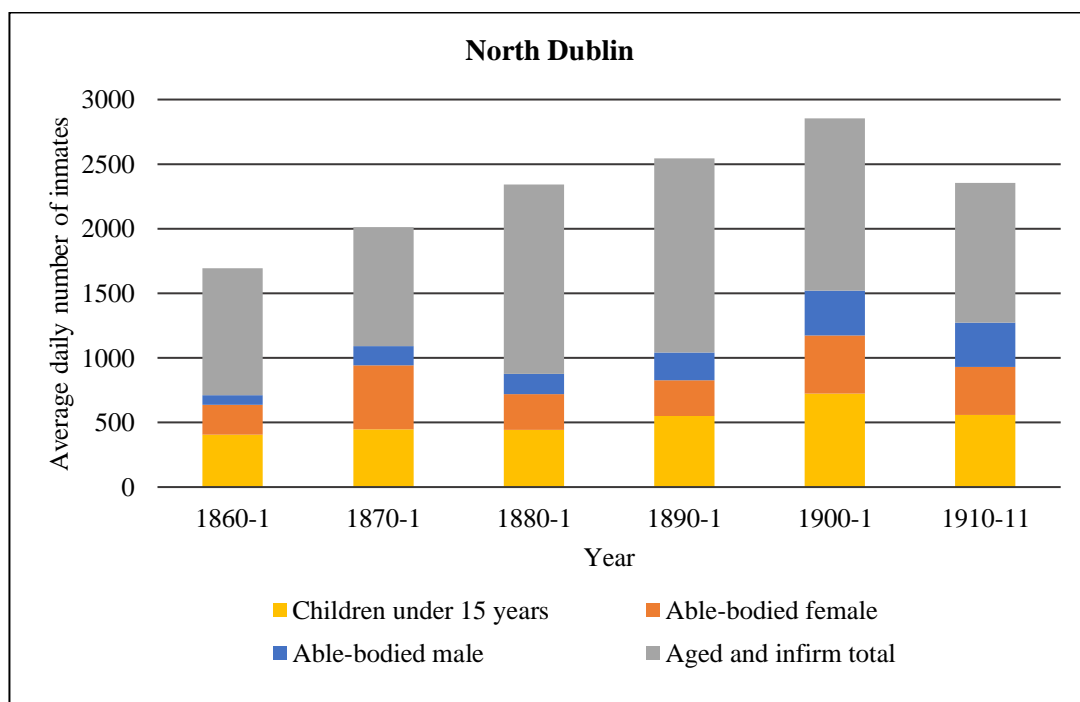
were unavailable, those for the next closest available year have been substituted when appropriate. No substitute has been included in place of 1910-11 at Westport due to the unavailability of returns for years that closely preceded or followed this census year. The annual totals for the average daily numbers of indoor relief recipients are subdivided in Figure 4 to show the number of recipients in each inmate category: able-bodied men, able-bodied women, children under 15, and the aged and infirm. Unlike the statistical returns for indoor relief nationally, persons who were admitted for hospital treatment were not categorised into a separate class in the returns from individual workhouses.

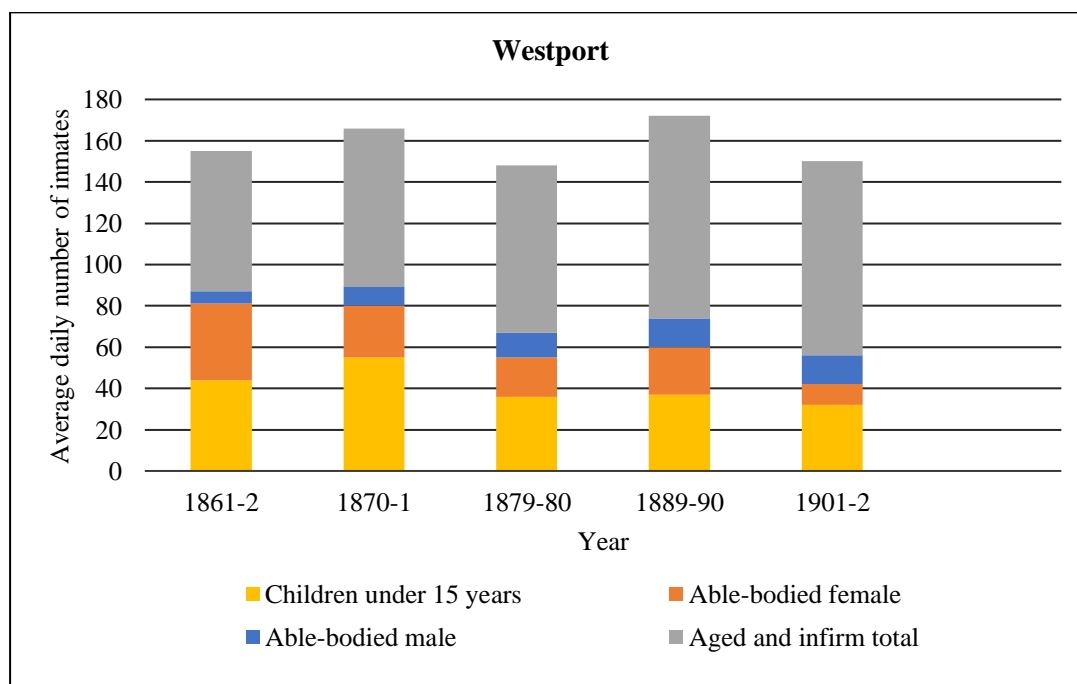
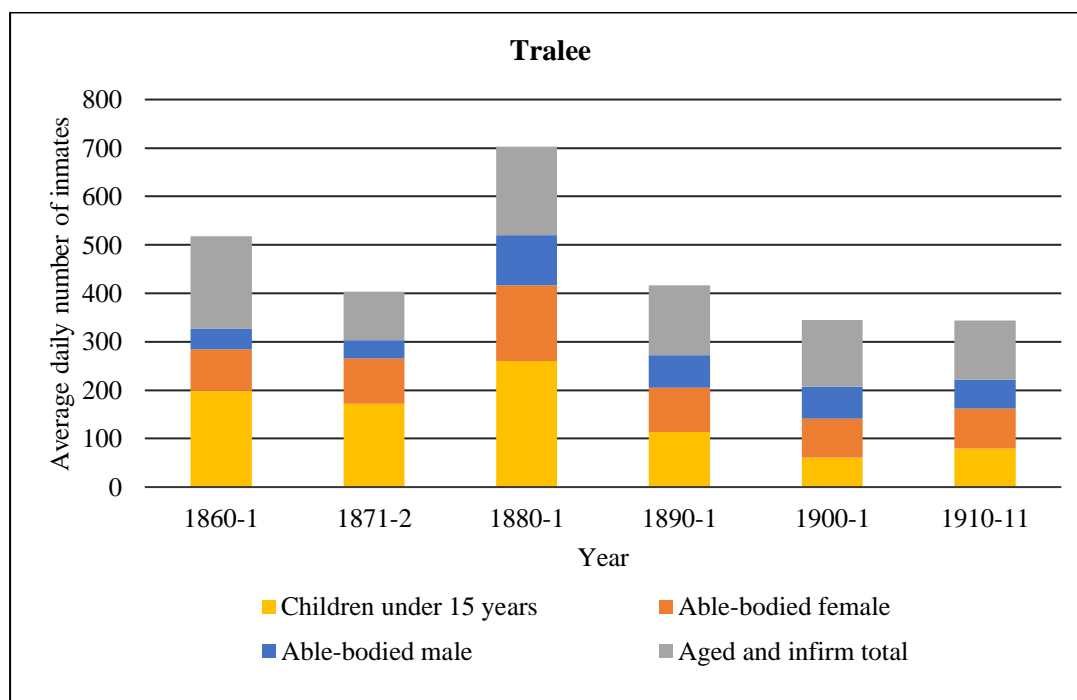
Figure 4 does not include data for 1850-51 because the significantly larger scale of the populations within many workhouses during the Great Famine preclude their graphical representation alongside the populations of later years. For example, the average daily numbers of indoor relief recipients for 1850-51 in the Thurles and Westport workhouses were 2,375 and 2,323 respectively, but by 1860-61 these populations had decreased to 373 and 155 respectively.⁴⁹ The earlier passing of famine conditions in eastern areas of Ireland meant that the average daily number of indoor relief recipients in the Ballymoney, Belfast, and North Dublin workhouses decreased to a lesser extent than in workhouses in the southern and western regions between 1850-51 and 1860-61: from 296 to 162 at Ballymoney; from 1,669 to 1,143 at Belfast; and from 2,376 to 1,693 at North Dublin. Although these decreases may be more easily represented upon a single graph than is the case for Westport and Thurles, the 1850-51 data has been excluded from the graphs of all six case studies for the purposes of consistency and ease of comparison. Of final note regarding the statistical returns for 1850-51, and in line with the national situation, children were the single largest category of inmates in the average daily population of each workhouse for which data is available: children accounted for 55.4 per cent of inmates at Ballymoney, 45.3 per cent at Belfast, 43.6 per cent in North Dublin, 52.1 per cent in Thurles, and 54.9 at the

⁴⁹ Statistical returns for the number of indoor relief recipients in the Tralee workhouse in 1850-51 are unavailable.

Figure 4: The average daily number of inmates in the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, Thurles, Tralee, and Westport workhouses, 1860-1911







Source: Minute Books of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, Thurles, Tralee, and Westport Boards of Guardians, 1860-1911.

Westport workhouse. Children thus accounted for larger percentages of inmates in the three rural workhouses than in the two urban workhouses at the close of the Great Famine.

The total average daily populations of the above six workhouses changed and fluctuated according to different patterns between 1860-61 and 1910-11. The populations of the Ballymoney, Thurles, and Tralee workhouses displayed a gradual decline during the post-Famine era overall, but they also exhibited notable peaks corresponding with periods of economic distress in 1860-61 and 1880-81, and additionally in 1900-01 in Ballymoney. The Ballymoney population was subject to less numerical fluctuation than the Thurles and Tralee populations, however. The population of the Westport workhouse was relatively consistent across each year under consideration with no discernible trend. It is probable that the Westport population increased considerably during 1880-81 due to the location of the workhouse within the western region which experienced acute agricultural distress and agitation during this period. This data is not available, however, and its absence highlights the drawback in the use of a discrete methodology in the analysis of workhouse populations.

The populations of the Belfast and North Dublin workhouses vastly outnumbered those of the rural workhouses, and they increased considerably with each ten-year interval over the post-Famine era, except for 1910-11 at North Dublin when the population decreased. This sustained increase of urban indoor relief recipients was driven in part by the prolonged fall in the demand for agricultural labour after the Great Famine.⁵⁰ Former agricultural labourers and their families migrated from rural areas into the cities in search of work. Migration was especially high into the expanding industrial centre of Belfast, the population of which increased from 125,668 to 350,862 between 1851 and 1911. Rural migrants were attracted to Belfast and other urban centres by the greater availability employment opportunities and higher wages for men

⁵⁰ David Fitzpatrick, 'The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer, 1841-1912', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 7 (1980), pp 66-92

and also, crucially, for women.⁵¹ By 1901, Belfast was ‘a city of migrants’ with only 39 per cent of the population born within the city.⁵² The absence of a family or neighbour support network, and the insecurities associated with the search for accommodation and employment, meant that many migrants and their children resorted to indoor relief within the Belfast workhouse during periods of hardship. The Belfast Guardians were resentful of providing relief to migrants, however, with one Guardian asserting that ‘there was no doubt the poor in Belfast were not the poor of Belfast.’⁵³ As there was no settlement law for poor relief in Ireland, urban Boards of Guardians were not allowed to distinguish between the local and migrant destitute poor in the administration of relief.

Children accounted for a lower percentage of inmates in the workhouses in 1860-61 than they had ten years previously: children comprised 44.4 per cent of the 1860-61 Ballymoney workhouse population, 41.8 per cent of Thurles, 38.4 per cent of Tralee, 32.3 per cent of Belfast, 23.9 per cent of North Dublin. Additionally, children represented 28.4 per cent of the Westport population in 1861-62. As was the situation at the close of the Great Famine, children therefore tended to account for a greater percentage of inmates in the rural workhouses of Ballymoney and Thurles, as well as Tralee, than in Belfast and North Dublin. There was a more significant decrease in the percentage of children at the Westport workhouse than in the other rural workhouses, however. Despite this variation, there was a similar pattern of decline in the numbers of children in the populations of all four rural workhouses over the remainder of the post-Famine era, although the number of children in the Ballymoney workhouse increased in 1900-01 and in the Thurles and Tralee workhouses in 1910-11. Nevertheless, the percentage of workhouse inmates represented by children generally

⁵¹ Lesley E. E. Donaldson, “‘The family wage’ – a factor in migration?” in Olwen Purdue (ed.), *Belfast the emerging city, 1850-1914* (Dublin, 2012), pp 211-34.

⁵² Anthony C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and nationalist Ireland in the era of Joe Devlin, 1871-1934* (Oxford, 2008), pp 9-10.

⁵³ *Belfast News Letter*, 21 Nov. 1866.

remained relatively static in the rural workhouse populations in the census years from 1890-91 through 1910-11.

In the North Dublin workhouse, the number of children increased slightly until 1900-01, but their percentage within the workhouse population had fallen to 18.9 per cent in 1880-81 and then increased to 25.4 per cent in 1900-01 before again falling to 23.7 per cent in 1910-11. At Belfast, the percentage of workhouse inmates accounted for by children decreased more substantially to 15.6 per cent in 1890-91 before increasing to 18.4 per cent in 1900-01 and falling slightly to 18.0 per cent in 1910-11. Variations in the percentage representation of children among indoor relief recipients were therefore less apparent at a regional level between the four rural workhouses than they were in the comparison between the urban and rural workhouses and, indeed, between the two urban workhouses.

There were also variations between the adult populations in different workhouses. At Ballymoney, able-bodied males represented 8.6 per cent of inmates in 1860-1 and this percentage had decreased to 5.1 per cent by 1910-11. At 13.4 per cent of inmates in 1860-1, Thurles had a larger population of able-bodied males than Ballymoney. By 1890-91, however, able-bodied men in Thurles were almost non-existent and remained few in number through to 1910-11. This sharp decrease in the numbers of able-bodied adults in Thurles may have been related to the more liberal provision of outdoor relief in the southern region from 1879 onwards. Yet, in contrast, the able-bodied male populations of Tralee and Westport increased as a percentage of inmates over the post-Famine era. As at the national level, able-bodied women generally outnumbered able-bodied men.

The Belfast and North Dublin workhouses tended to have larger percentages of able-bodied adults than was the case in rural workhouses, apart from Tralee, and the number of able-bodied adults in urban workhouses was frequently higher than the number of children. Further in line with the national trend, the populations of most of the workhouse case studies became dominated by the aged and infirm. There were

particularly large increases in the percentages accounted for by the aged and infirm in the Ballymoney, Belfast, Thurles, and Westport workhouses. However, there was little such increase at Tralee while at North Dublin the aged and infirm percentage decreased from 58.0 per cent in 1860-61 to 46.0 per cent in 1910-11. This decrease in North Dublin may have been due to the greater range of medical institutions open to the sick and infirm poor aside from the workhouses in Dublin in comparison to Belfast where the workhouse served as the principal hospital for the sick poor in the city.

The populations of the six workhouse case studies exhibited a range of national, regional, and local characteristics. National trends were evident in most workhouses in the decrease in the numbers of children and the increases in the population of the aged and infirm. Regional distinctions can be observed in the numbers and percentages of able-bodied inmates. Whereas the percentages of inmates represented by able-bodied inmates was relatively small and declined over the post-Famine period in the northern Ballymoney workhouse, a much larger percentage was initially accounted for by the able-bodied in the southern Thurles workhouse but then decreased considerably, while the able-bodied percentages remained relatively consistent in both western workhouses. Women accounted for more able-bodied inmates than men, especially in the urban workhouses of North Dublin and Belfast. Regarding the number and percentage of inmates accounted for by children, the national pattern was evident in all of these workhouses although there were notable distinctions between rural and urban workhouses.

This has been only an exploratory analysis of demographic changes and variations within the workhouse populations over the post-Famine era. Further statistical examination is required to compare the populations of these six workhouses with those of further case studies, as well as to provide an assessment of population changes of individual workhouses over continuous periods of time between each census year interval. Although some workhouse populations increased considerably in 1880-81 due to economic distress, only the Belfast and North Dublin populations subsequently surpassed their level at the close of the Great Famine in 1850-51. The

analysis in this chapter will now turn towards a closer examination of the significant changes in the demography of children in the workhouses during the first post-Famine decade.

V: Famine orphans and abandoned children

During the Great Famine, the number of children within the workhouses continued to rise until 1852 when the end of the crisis enabled many to leave with their families. Yet for some children, the passing of famine conditions did not mark an end to the impact of the disaster upon them. These were often the children who had been left orphaned, abandoned, or without a traceable relative and they had little capacity to leave these institutions until they were old enough to find work to support themselves outside. This residual population of orphaned and abandoned children has been described by Joseph Robins as one of the ‘grimmiest scars’ of the Famine.⁵⁴ This section is an investigation into the scale of this demographic scar within the workhouse populations of the 1850s. The analysis shows that many children remained confined within the workhouses for years or in some cases for over a decade after the Famine. Moreover, this section reveals that it was not until the early 1860s that the demographics of workhouse children came to solely reflect the causes of post-Famine destitution.

The 1850s were a decade of economic recovery in Ireland. The decline in population caused by famine-induced mortality and emigration was reported to have contributed towards ‘the material improvement in the rate of wages’ and an ‘increased constancy of employment of agricultural labourers and their families’ from the mid-1850s.⁵⁵ The economic recovery was such that Denis O’Conner, the medical officer of the Cork workhouse, commented that, ‘[a] person observing the state of this country in 1855, as compared with its condition in the previous ten years, might imagine he

⁵⁴ Robins, *Lost children*, p. 192.

⁵⁵ *Ninth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2105], H.C. 1856, xxviii, 415, pp 10-11.

had awoke from a horrid dream.⁵⁶ Yet, O'Conner added that there had been little change within the workhouses since the Great Famine, 'for they still contained within them all those whom the famine had disabled, like the wounded after a battle.'⁵⁷ Women and children especially remained as a large percentage of the workhouse population which Peter Gray argues was 'hardly surprising' since 'a high proportion of those remaining were those with little ability to gain from the opportunities of rising wages or emigrant remittances.'⁵⁸ Orphaned and abandoned children possessed the least capacity to leave the workhouses and gain from the improved economic opportunities that followed the Great Famine.

The numbers of children left orphaned or abandoned in the workhouses during the Great Famine is indicated through a statistical examination of the children who were in receipt of indoor relief without their parents. The overall trend in the number of children without their parents followed the pattern of decline in the total number of inmates during the first post-Famine decade. In the half-year period of March-September 1851, there were 87,697 children who received indoor relief without their parents. Their numbers decreased in every subsequent half-year to a low of 9,634 in March-September 1860, after which they increased by several thousand during the early 1860s but decreased again thereafter. Despite their numerical decline, however, children without parents accounted for an increased percentage of children in the workhouses in the years immediately following the Great Famine.

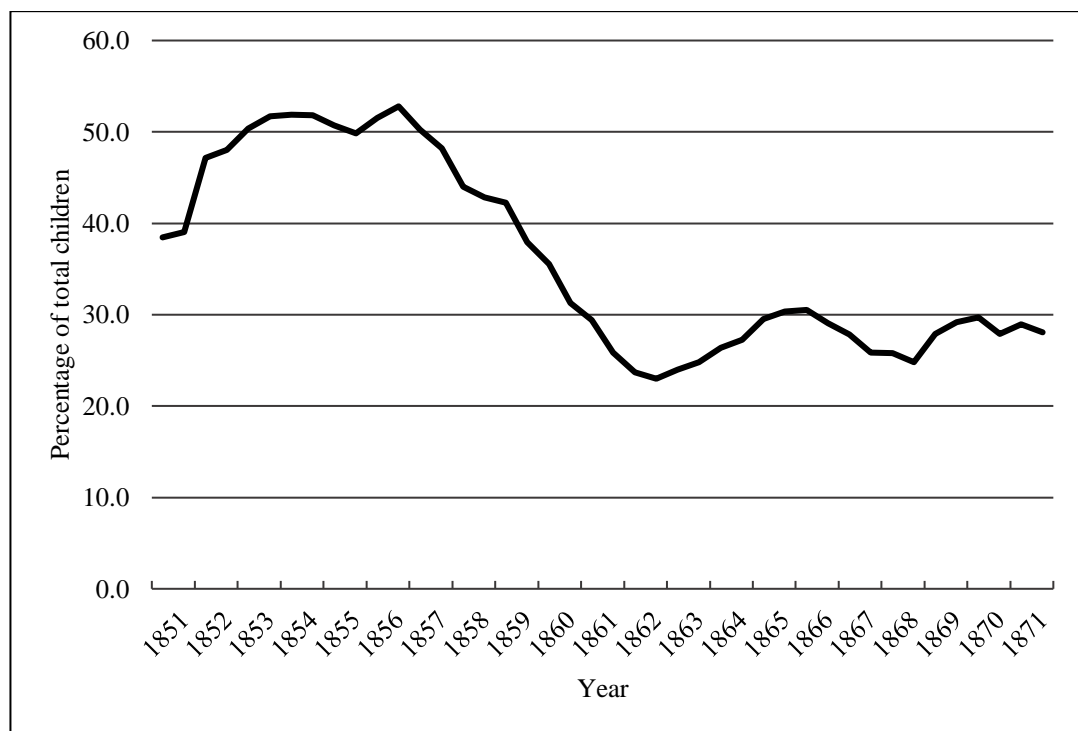
Figure 5 is an illustration of children without parents as a percentage of the annual total numbers of children who were in receipt of indoor relief between 1851 and 1871. In 1851, 39.0 per cent of children were without parents but this proportion then increased to a peak of 52.8 per cent in 1856 before declining to a low of 23.0 per cent in 1862. The percentage represented by children without parents fluctuated between 24.0 per cent and 30.3 per cent for the remainder of the 1860s and did not fall

⁵⁶ O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 52.

⁵⁸ Gray, 'Irish social thought', p. 146.

Figure 5: Children without parents as a percentage of the total number of children in receipt of indoor relief, 1851-71



Source: Annual reports of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland, 1852-72

below 20.0 per cent until 1886. These statistics imply that the initial decrease in the numbers of children in the workhouses after the Famine was mainly accounted for by the departure of children with parents, and that those without parents consequently came to increase as a percentage of children until 1856. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Poor Law Commissioners considered the impact of the Great Famine upon the inmate population to have ceased in 1860.⁵⁹ However, the percentage of children without parents continued to decrease until 1862 which may indicate that the effects of the Great Famine remained evident among the juvenile population for slightly longer. However, as these statistics included children who lost parents in the

⁵⁹ *Thirteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 4.

succeeding years as well as children who were admitted alone for hospital treatment, it remains unclear from Figure 5 whether the decrease between 1857 and 1862 in the percentage of children without parents reflected the delayed departure of the children left orphaned or abandoned during the Great Famine.

Several qualitative sources support the argument that this initial increase and delayed subsequent fall in the percentage of children without parents was the product of the prolonged residency of famine orphans and abandoned children. Upon visiting the Enniskillen workhouse in 1853, the physician Sir John Forbes reported that over two thirds of the children in the institution were orphans. According to Forbes, the number of children had decreased since 1850 but ‘the proportional decrease ... is much less than that of the adults, a circumstance easily to be explained by the orphaned condition of so large a proportion of them preventing their removal from the house.’⁶⁰ Similarly, in 1854, a National Education report on workhouse schools included observations on the large numbers of orphaned children who ‘remain there as in their fixed home,’ and about whom an inspector anticipated that, ‘for some few years to come the number of these children, relatively to the whole mass of the destitute, is not likely to undergo any material decrease.’⁶¹ In addition, in 1857, a North Dublin workhouse teacher claimed that ‘it is manifest that nearly all the children in workhouses are virtually orphans’.⁶² It was probable that many of these were famine orphans since although there were some children who had been orphaned or abandoned after the Great Famine in the workhouses, many Boards of Guardians restricted the admission of such children during the early 1850s.⁶³ These restrictions were imposed due to concerns about mortality among infants without their mothers, because of the

⁶⁰ John Forbes, *Memorandums of a tour in Ireland* (London, 1853), p. 96.

⁶¹ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, [1834], H.C. 1854, xxx, 1, pp 633, 639.

⁶² John Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions, and pauper and National Education in Ireland* (Dublin, 1857), p. 185.

⁶³ For examples, see: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1850. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1855. NAI, BG/78/A/25; Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1856. PRONI, BG/1/A/5; Newry Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1851. PRONI, BG/2/A/7.

already large populations of orphaned and abandoned children within the workhouses, and because Boards of Guardians argued that the care of such children should have been the responsibility of the parish overseers of deserted children.

The personal histories of several girls selected for transfer in 1859 from the North Dublin workhouse to the nearby St Joseph's Industrial Institute for training as domestic servants convey the variety of individual experiences among children who were left orphaned or abandoned in the workhouses during the Great Famine:

1. Age between fourteen and fifteen; has been *nine* years in the Workhouse; is an orphan. Heard that her mother died long ago, and that her father also died soon after he came to the Union, with his two children. Does not remember to have ever seen her father. No one has ever come [sic] to enquire for them since. The little sister is still in the Union. Has no acquaintance whatsoever outside.
2. Age between fourteen and fifteen. Has been *fourteen* years in the Workhouse; is an orphan. Knows nothing of her father and mother; never heard how she came to the Union. Has no acquaintance any where [sic].
3. Age about sixteen; has been *fourteen* years in the Workhouse; is motherless and knows nothing of her father; thinks he may be alive; heard that he went to America long ago. Has an aunt in Dublin, but cannot tell where she lives. Has heard nothing of these relatives for some time.
4. Age sixteen. Has been *ten* years in the Workhouse. Is motherless; cannot tell whether her father is alive. Was brought to the Union by her mother, who died there soon after; does not remember her. Thinks she has brothers in Kilkenny, but knows nothing about them. Has no relative in the Union, is not acquainted with any one [sic] outside.'
5. Age sixteen; has been *nine* years in the Workhouse; is an orphan; her father, a soldier, died ten years ago, and his widow about a year after went to the Union with five children ... where, after lingering in very bad health for four years, she died. Two of her brothers are in situation,

she cannot tell where; another brother, and a sister, remain in the Union.⁶⁴

According to the managers of St Joseph's institute, these girls 'were not selected for the strangeness of their history, or as quite extraordinary examples of desertion and utter friendlessness', but rather, '[t]hey were taken, almost at random, from a class of nearly *three hundred*.'⁶⁵

The above personal histories highlight the permanency of the confinement experienced by many orphaned and abandoned children in the workhouses during the 1850s. The histories are also revealing of how little the girls knew or could remember about their parents and wider family circumstances. One workhouse school inspector regarded this 'weakening and disruption of those social and family ties, the strength of which heretofore formed so remarkable a feature in the Irish home and heart' as 'one of the worst results of the famine.'⁶⁶ The girls' ignorance about their parents was indicative too of poor record keeping by workhouse officials when the girls were admitted which, in turn, may have reflected the extent of social confusion and pressure upon the poor relief system during the famine years. In many cases, poor relief authorities were unsure whether a child was orphaned, abandoned, or had wider kin. Official statistics from 1853 state that of the 50,129 children aged between 9 and 14 who had received relief in the workhouses, 16,306 (32.5 per cent) were orphans who had lost both parents, 17,730 (35.4 per cent) were described as half-orphans who had lost one parent, and 10,656 (21.3 per cent) had been abandoned by their families.⁶⁷ The distinctions between these categories were blurred and overlapped in official statistical returns, however, and public commentary increasingly assumed that the vast majority at least of children in the workhouses were orphans without either parent.

⁶⁴ Anon., 'St. Joseph's Industrial Institute with special reference to its intern class of workhouse orphans', *The Irish Quarterly Review*, 8 (1859), pp 2-4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp 4-5.

⁶⁶ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education*, p. 634.

⁶⁷ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 11-14.

Official statistics for the numbers of orphans included some children who had been abandoned either temporarily or permanently by their parents. The Poor Law Commissioners suspected that among the children admitted into the workhouses during the Famine, 'a larger proportion of them are entered as orphans than really are so,' with a 'large number' instead having been left there by emigrated parents.⁶⁸ Dympna McLoughlin suggests that parents used the workhouses as 'a safe place' in which to temporarily leave young or sick children, who may not have survived an ocean crossing, with the intention of sending back remittances to fund their children's voyages at a later date.⁶⁹ Such temporary abandonment of children by emigrating parents should be viewed within a context of desperation and as an emotionally difficult decision. Denis O'Connor, a Medical Officer of the Cork workhouse, recounted that the clandestine way in which parents felt they had to leave their children in the workhouses made the moment of separation even more emotionally difficult:

It was a common practice for parents going in search of employment to get their children admitted to the workhouse as orphans; and it was most touching to see one of these poor men hanging over a sick child in hospital, whom he represented to be his nephew, but whom the affectionate embrace, the close whispering lest the conversation should betray them, the sobs and tears of both when parting, showed to be in a closer degree of relationship.⁷⁰

During the 1850s, many parents sent remittances to Boards of Guardians who then contributed towards the cost of a child's voyage.⁷¹ However, parents had no guarantee as to when their child would be sent to them since 'it sometimes required several days' search before its identity could be established, amidst the multitude of the same name' or because of 'the child having altogether forgotten its own surname, and the fact of

⁶⁸ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, [515], H.C. 1852, vii, 1, p. 347.

⁶⁹ McLoughlin, 'Superfluous and unwanted deadweight', pp 76-7.

⁷⁰ O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 48.

⁷¹ For examples, see: Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/8; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1850. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/17; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1852. NAI, BG/78/A/18.

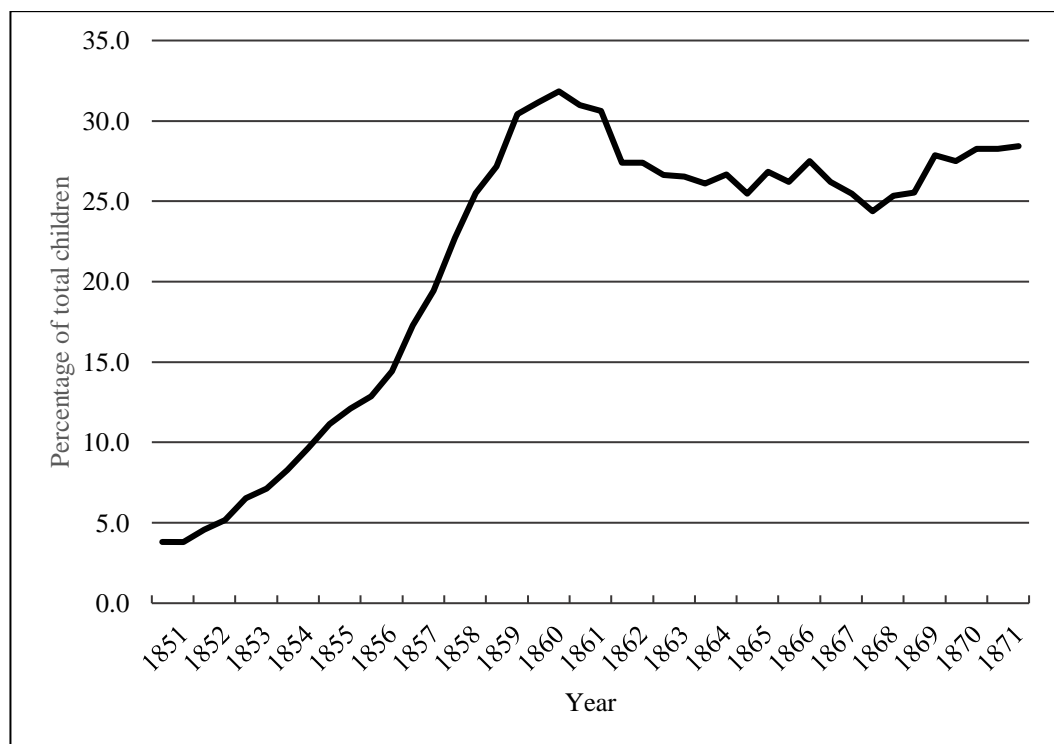
its having any surviving parent.’⁷² The separation of children from their parents was often permanent. O’Connor observed that for many parents who left their children in the workhouse, ‘often this was their last meeting in this world; for children then went out of life like bubbles bursting on the stream.’⁷³

As the numbers of children who had been left orphaned or abandoned in the workhouses during the Great Famine decreased over the 1850s, the population of children in the workhouses became increasingly representative of the main causes of child destitution in post-Famine Ireland, particularly unmarried motherhood and illegitimacy. In the half-year of March-September 1851, 8,545 illegitimate children received relief in the workhouses. In the same half-year period in 1860, the number of illegitimate children had increased to 10,798. Although this numerical rise was relatively modest, it represented an extraordinary percentage increase within the population of children in receipt of indoor relief. Figure 6 shows the percentage of children in receipt of indoor relief who were illegitimate between 1851 and 1871. Whereas only 3.8 per cent of children were illegitimate in 1851, their percentage had increased to 31.8 per cent by 1860. In March-September 1863, the number of illegitimate children had reached 14,650, although they had fallen as a percentage of all children to 26.5 per cent in consequence of the admission of more families with legitimate children during a period of renewed agricultural distress. This percentage remained relatively consistent through the 1860s and 1870s. By September-March 1881, the percentage of illegitimate children had fallen to 18.4 per cent which accounted for 7,362 children and had fallen further to 15.0 per cent by March-September 1901 which represented 5,366 children. In March-September 1907, the last period for which statistics of the number of illegitimate children were produced, there were 4,773 illegitimate children which accounted for 11.9 per cent of all children. Illegitimate children therefore accounted for a greater percentage of children throughout the post-Famine era than they had during the Great Famine.

⁷² O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, p. 48.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Figure 6: Illegitimate children as a percentage of the total number of children in receipt of indoor relief, 1851-71



Source: Annual reports of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland, 1852-72

Contemporary commentators alleged that the rapidly increasing representation of illegitimate children in the workhouses during the 1850s was evidence of a decline in the standard of morality among the labouring classes after the Famine. Many witnesses to the Poor Inquiry between 1833 and 1836 had expressed the popular belief that illegitimacy was rare in Ireland.⁷⁴ In 1853, Forbes remarked that while '[u]nmarried mothers are ... quite a rarity in Ireland', the prevalence of illegitimacy in the workhouses led him to suggest, 'that the purity of female life in Ireland falls not a little below the standard which common opinion has set up.'⁷⁵ The analysis of parish

⁷⁴ *Third report of the commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, [43]. H.C. 1836, xxx, 1.

⁷⁵ Forbes, *Memorandums*, pp 103, 241.

registers for the period 1841 to 1860 has shown that 2.5 per cent of children across Ireland were illegitimate, but Sean Connolly argues that there was likely to have been a considerable underreporting of illegitimacy before the introduction of civil registration in 1864.⁷⁶ The greater extent of illegitimacy within the workhouses may therefore have been partly a result of the more systematic recording of illegitimacy by poor relief officials.⁷⁷

Regional variations in the extent of illegitimacy in the workhouses were given moral significance by some commentators. In January 1854, whereas 26.4 per cent of women in Ulster workhouses had illegitimate children, the collective figure for all workhouses across Ireland was 11.6 per cent.⁷⁸ Forbes argued that the greater urbanisation and industrialisation of Ulster ‘may help to explain the inferior standard of morals among the young women’ as it was ‘a state of society well-known to predispose to immorality.’⁷⁹ The increase in illegitimacy among children in the workhouses was a cause for concern for social commentators and poor relief officials and it became a motivation behind the introduction of systems of moral classification in many workhouses during the late 1850s.⁸⁰

The increased percentage of illegitimate children during the 1850s should be understood primarily as part of a prolonged adjustment in the demography of children in receipt of poor relief from one occasioned by a national subsistence crisis to one that reflected the causes of destitution outside of famine conditions. Whereas the rise in the percentage of children without parents between 1851 and 1856 was a product of the departure of children who had been admitted with their families during the Great Famine, the increased percentage of illegitimate children, particularly from 1856 to

⁷⁶ Sean J. Connolly, ‘Illegitimacy and pre-nuptial pregnancy in Ireland before 1864: the evidence of some Catholic parish registers’, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 6 (1979), pp 5-23.

⁷⁷ See: Liam Kennedy and Peter Gray, ‘Famine, illegitimacy, and the workhouse in western Ireland: Kilrush, County Clare’ in Alys Levene et al (eds), *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700-1920* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp 122-40.

⁷⁸ *Return of the number of females with illegitimate children in workhouses in Ireland, January 1854*, [183], H.C. 1854, lv, 747.

⁷⁹ Forbes, *Memorandums*. p. 246.

⁸⁰ See: Chapter Eight, pp 258-63.

1860, was partly caused by the eventual departure of those children who had been orphaned or abandoned during the crisis. There is also qualitative evidence that the increased percentage of illegitimate children was occasioned by the admission of greater numbers of unmarried mothers in the workhouses after the Great Famine. In 1861, the Poor Law Commissioners reported that among able-bodied female inmates, ‘no inconsiderable number of them [are] single females rendered destitute by pregnancy, or as mothers of illegitimate children’ and that ‘[t]his branch of destitution ... is less liable to fluctuation through the prosperous or adverse circumstances of the population than any of the others represented by the workhouse statistics.’⁸¹ The Commissioners thus understood unmarried motherhood as a cause of destitution that occurred in large part independent of economic conditions in post-Famine Ireland.

VI: Conclusion

Recent scholarly studies have identified regional variations in the receipt of poor relief in the north, south, and west of Ireland. Relative to population, the south had the highest numbers of indoor and outdoor relief recipients, the west had consistently low numbers of indoor recipients but an increased number of outdoor recipients by the late nineteenth century, and the north had low numbers of recipients of indoor and especially of outdoor relief. Families in receipt of outdoor relief, mainly due to the temporary disability of a father or because a mother was a widow with at least two legitimate children, therefore tended to reside in the southern and western regions. The numbers of children in receipt of outdoor relief decreased during the decade after the Great Famine but then increased considerably by 1881. This analysis has shown that the liberalisation of outdoor relief had more consequence for adults than for children.

A study of national trends in the numbers of children in receipt of indoor relief shows that children were the largest inmate category at the close of the Great Famine,

⁸¹ *Fourteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 12.

but they then decreased both in terms of numbers and as a percentage of inmates as the numbers of hospital patients and of aged and infirm inmates increased. These two national trends were evident in the populations of the six workhouse case studies. Some regional differences were apparent within these local statistics, but the most significant variations concerning the populations of children were between the four rural and the two urban workhouses.

During the 1850s, the demography of workhouse children adjusted to reflect the causes of destitution outside of famine conditions. The delayed departure of children who had been orphaned or abandoned during the Great Famine meant that they increased as a percentage of children until 1856 before declining until the early-1860s. Concurrently, the percentage of children who were illegitimate increased as such orphans and abandoned children became old enough to leave the workhouses. These demographic trends provide context for understanding the development of poor relief policies towards children over the post-Famine era, but they give little insight into the family circumstances of children or the varied reasons for which they were in receipt of poor relief. The family is therefore the focus of the next two chapters which look at the significance of poor relief in the economy of makeshifts, and the range of children's family forms upon their admission into the workhouses.

Chapter Two

Poor relief and the economy of makeshifts

I: Introduction

The history of the childhood of the poor, Alys Levene has pointed out, ‘makes little sense without due consideration of family forms and experiences.’¹ In the historical analysis of children’s encounters with poverty and welfare, the family unit, including its structures and relationships, is a necessary subject of inquiry. The Irish Poor Law was imbued with New Poor Law assumptions on family responsibility and dependency. Poor Law policy towards the family therefore centred upon the duty of a parent, specifically a male breadwinner, to support their dependents. There was an expectation that while the ratepayer may subsidise relief for a family in times of destitution, that relief did not supersede parents’ responsibilities for their children. The principle of less eligibility, the deterrent effects of the workhouse test, and the requirement for a head of household to enter the institution when any of their dependents were admitted, were attempts by poor relief authorities to enforce onto poor families these expectations of parental responsibility.² Viewed in this light, the separation of family members upon their admission into a workhouse served as an emasculating manifestation of a father’s failure to adequately provide for his own dependents.³

The analysis herein and in the succeeding chapter on the interactions between poor families and the poor relief system demonstrates, however, that this gendered model of responsibility and dependency stood in contrast with the fluid interdependencies and relationships within families in receipt of relief and within those

¹ Levene, *The childhood of the poor*, p. 21.

² Margaret A. Crowther, ‘Family responsibility and state responsibility in Britain before the welfare state’, *The Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), p. 131.

³ Megan Doolittle, ‘Fatherhood and family shame: masculinity, welfare and the workhouse in late nineteenth-century England’ in Lucy Delap et al. (eds), *The politics of domestic authority in Britain since 1800* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp 102-3.

of the labouring classes more generally. This chapter explores how statutory poor relief under the Irish Poor Law was accessed and utilised within the economies of makeshifts of poor families in post-Famine Ireland. It shows that an application for poor relief was one of a range of survival strategies employed by poor and destitute families alongside other forms of institutional welfare, self-help, employment, charity, and begging. However, the availability of statutory poor relief had the effect of limiting the access of some families to other forms of welfare and charity. The chapter shows that, depending upon their age and health, children had the potential to make vital contributions towards the makeshift economies of their families. Moreover, contemporary accounts on the hardships that families were prepared to endure rather than apply for poor relief provide evidence that the workhouse test of destitution, particularly regarding the enforced separation of children from their parents upon admission, acted as a powerful deterrent against families seeking relief.

II: The economy of makeshifts

Historians of poverty and welfare have noted that poor families moved in and out of destitution depending on the availability of employment, their capacity to work, incidences of family crisis, and the accessibility of welfare support. In her study of the poor in eighteenth-century France, Olwen Hufton introduced the concept of the ‘economy of makeshifts’ as a description of the range of resources adopted by the poorer classes in order to make ends meet.⁴ Studies of poverty and welfare in Britain have highlighted the wide variety of resources used by the poor, in particular the importance of voluntary and statutory forms of welfare within the economy of makeshifts.⁵ To reflect the expansion of state-funded social welfare during the early

⁴ Olwen Hufton, *The poor of eighteenth-century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974).

⁵ See: Lynn Hollen Lees, *The solidarities of strangers: the English Poor Laws and the people, 1700-1948* (Cambridge, 1998); Andrew Blaikie, ‘Nuclear hardship or variant dependency? Households and the Scottish Poor Law’, *Continuity and Change*, 17 (2002), pp 253-80; Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (eds), *The poor in England: an economy of makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003); Samantha Williams, *Gender and lifecycle under the English Poor Law, 1760-1834* (Woodbridge, 2011);

twentieth century, some studies have suggested that the economy of makeshifts transformed into a 'mixed economy of welfare', but this term may obscure the continued significance of informal means of support.⁶ The availability of records which pertained to statutory welfare in comparison to those for the many informal earning strategies that poor families likely employed means that historians may firstly place undue emphasis upon the role of statutory welfare, and secondly find it difficult to comprehend the diversity of potential sources of income within the economy of makeshifts. Indeed, in a study of the economies of makeshifts of families in Bedfordshire during the early years of the New Poor Law, Samantha Williams has highlighted the challenge of quantifying the contributions gleaned from makeshift sources to the household budgets of the poor who, 'were the most inventive at exploiting potential sources of income.'⁷ Scholarly studies of the economy of makeshifts in Ireland have focused mainly upon the struggles of poor families who lived in tenement lodgings in Dublin where high rates of unemployment necessitated supplementary sources of income such as pawning clothes, bartering, begging, mutual aid between families, and charitable support.⁸

As the first national system of statutory poor relief, the introduction of the Irish Poor Law in 1838 marked a significant change in the role of institutional welfare within the economies of makeshift of the destitute poor. Before the Irish Poor Law was introduced, the availability of poor relief was characterised by an ad-hoc provision of mutual aid among the poor, mendicity societies, denominational alms-giving, and

Joseph Harley, 'Material lives of the poor and their strategic use of the workhouse during the final decades of the English Old Poor Law', *Continuity and Change*, 30 (2015), pp 71-103

⁶ Geoffrey Finlayson, 'A moving frontier: voluntarism and the state in British social welfare, 1911-1949', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), pp 183-206; Kidd, *State, society and the poor*, pp 1-7; Donnacha S. Lucey, *The end of the Irish Poor Law? Welfare and healthcare reform in revolutionary and independent Ireland* (Manchester, 2015), pp 1-2.

⁷ Samantha Williams, 'Earnings, poor relief and the economy of makeshifts: Bedfordshire in the early years of the New Poor Law', *Rural History*, 16 (2005), p. 46.

⁸ Daly, *Dublin, the deposed capital*, pp 83-107; Ruth McManus, 'Lord Mayor Laurence O'Neill, Alderman Tom Kelly and Dublin's housing crisis' in Ruth McManus and Lisa-Marie Griffith (eds), *Leaders of the city: Dublin's first citizens, 1500-1950* (Dublin, 2013), pp 141-51; Sarah-Anne Buckley, "'Growing up poor": child welfare, motherhood and the state during the First World War', *Women's History Review*, 27 (2018), pp 343-59.

charitable and municipal institutions located mainly in towns and cities. By 1800, most major urban centres contained a variety of public subscription-funded welfare institutions such as houses of industry, hospitals, and asylums.⁹ Some institutions, such as the Dublin Foundling Hospital, were availed of by the poor from across the country, and some houses of industry functioned in a similar fashion to the Poor Law Union workhouses that replaced them.¹⁰ The limited availability of rural welfare and the concentration of ‘innumerable institutions’ in Dublin was alleged to have attracted to the city ‘hordes of beggars’ who ‘filled the country roads and towns.’¹¹ Many of these migrants were seasonal workers who got their families admitted into institutions in Dublin while they sought employment abroad.¹² In the rural context, David Dickson has identified ‘an old Irish Poor Law of sorts’ that was based upon the parishes of the Established Church, but he notes that vestries that were active in the distribution of relief were confined to northern and eastern areas with significant Protestant populations.¹³ Catholic clergy were active in the distribution of alms in their parishes but there was little organization by the Catholic Church nationally.¹⁴ With the introduction of the Irish Poor Law, this patchwork provision of relief was superseded by a national system of workhouses which had, at least officially, uniform administrative procedures and criteria for admission. Coupled with the omission of a law of settlement within the legislation of 1838, this development made institutional poor relief more accessible for a much larger population of the destitute poor in Ireland. Recent studies on the Irish Poor Law has shown that both outdoor and indoor

⁹ Mel Cousins, ‘Philanthropy and poor relief before the Poor Law, 1801-30’ in Laurence M. Geary and Oonagh Walsh (eds), *Philanthropy in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2015), pp 23-37.

¹⁰ For example, see: David Fleming and John Logan (eds), *Pauper Limerick: the register of the Limerick house of industry, 1774-93* (Dublin, 2011).

¹¹ Kohl, *Ireland, Scotland, and England*, p. 154; O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, p. 10.

¹² Kohl, *Ireland, Scotland, and England*, p. 154.

¹³ David Dickson, ‘In search of the old Irish Poor Law’ in Rosalind Mitchison and Peter Roebuck (eds), *Economy and society in Scotland and Ireland, 1500-1939* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 157.

¹⁴ Timothy P. O’Neill, ‘The Catholic Church and relief of the poor, 1815-45’, *Archivium Hibernicum*, 31 (1973), pp 132-46.

relief were key resources in the survival strategies of the poorer classes and were accessed to meet a wide range of different needs.¹⁵

Several historians have argued that the greater availability of statutory poor relief after 1838 altered the broader 'demographic behaviour' of the labouring classes.¹⁶ Joel Mokyr and Timothy Guinnane have suggested that the Irish Poor Law occasioned a fall in marriage rates and a higher average age of marriage by providing an alternative to children as an insurance against destitution in old age.¹⁷ Evidence presented before the Poor Law Inquiry of the early-1830s indicated that children and early marriage were necessities for the poor to survive in the early nineteenth century. Several witnesses at the Inquiry remarked that, 'if a man marry at the age of 35, he will be broken down and unable to work before his children can be grown enough to support him', and that an elderly unmarried woman who was seen begging was considered 'a fool ... not to have got married' because 'she would have had children to keep her from that line of life.'¹⁸ Yet, while the availability of outdoor relief to some widows may have lessened their reliance upon children as a means of support, it is questionable whether the labouring classes considered the prospect of old age in the workhouse as an attractive alternative to marriage and children. Additionally, contemporary assumptions that poor relief would encourage improvidence and idleness among the destitute poor proved 'groundless or exaggerated'.¹⁹ In the context of the transformative effect of the Great Famine upon the demographics of the

¹⁵ Purdue, 'Poor relief in the north of Ireland', pp 23-36; Lucey, 'Poor relief in the west of Ireland', pp 37-52; Laragy, 'Poor relief in the south of Ireland', pp 53-66; Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 63-138.

¹⁶ Timothy W. Guinnane, *The vanishing Irish: households, migration, and the rural economy in Ireland, 1850-1914* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), p. 60.

¹⁷ Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland starved: a quantitative and analytical history of the Irish economy, 1800-1850* (London, 1985), p. 61; Guinnane, *The vanishing Irish*, p. 232.

¹⁸ *First report from His Majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, [369], H.C. 1835, xxxii, 1, p. 393, as quoted in Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918: a documentary history* (Cork, 1995), pp 26-7.

¹⁹ Robert D. C. Black, *Economic thought and the Irish question, 1817-1870* (Cambridge, 1960), pp 86-104; O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 24.

labouring classes, however, the extent to which greater access to relief initiated changes in demographic behaviour remains unclear.²⁰

Although poor relief became more accessible from 1838, children continued to make important contributions towards their families' household budgets. Scholarly studies of the economy of makeshifts in Britain have highlighted the vital contributions made by children as wage earners, carers of younger siblings, objects of charity, and as future providers for their elderly parents.²¹ However, children's capacity to contribute towards their family incomes depended upon their age, physical development, health, and the local availability of work for children or adolescents. For example, in his diary of visits to the homes of poor families in Belfast during the mid-1850s, the Revd. Anthony McIntyre of the Unitarian Domestic Mission contrasted the situation of one widow whose older children 'are helping her and she is better than she was since the death of her husband', with the experience of another widow whose two young daughters 'being little are not able to earn much.'²² In sickness especially, young children hindered their parents' abilities to provide for them. One young woman, who had previously earned 2s. a week from piecework, informed McIntyre that her 'child is very unwell this long time and greatly keeps me back' for it 'is seldom off my knee or out of my arms.'²³ Unable to support themselves while caring for a young or sick child, many poor mothers hired another woman to temporarily look after their child. This form of unregulated childcare, termed by Ciara Breathnach as the 'black economy of wet nursing', was used chiefly by poor women in urban areas

²⁰ Liam Kennedy and Leslie A. Clarkson, 'Birth, death and exile: Irish population history, 1700-1921' in Brian J. Graham and Lindsay P. Proudfoot (eds), *An historical geography of Ireland* (London, 1993), pp 162-9.

²¹ See: Hugh Cunningham, 'The employment and unemployment of children in England c. 1680-1851', *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), pp 115-50; Pamela Horn, *Children's work and welfare, 1780-1890* (Cambridge, 1995); Peter Kirby, *Child labour in Britain, 1750-1870* (Basingstoke, 2003); Jane Humphries, *Childhood and child labour in the British industrial revolution* (Cambridge, 2011); Nigel Goose, 'Child employment prospects in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire in perspective: varieties of childhood?' in Nigel Goose and Katrina Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and child labour in industrial England: diversity and agency, 1750-1914* (Farnham, 2013), pp 157-77

²² Diary kept by the Rev. Anthony McIntyre, 1853-1856. PRONI, D1558/2/3, pp 39, 57.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 1.

during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁴ Depending upon their individual circumstances, children were therefore either potential contributors or burdens in their families' economies of makeshift. Although the contributions by older children towards a family's income were important, they were made only after the family had already endured privations while the children were young or sick.

The greater accessibility of poor relief under the Irish Poor Law reportedly hardened the attitudes of the upper and middle classes towards charitable aid to the poor. As opponents of the Poor Law had anticipated, whereas charity had been previously 'freely and extensively bestowed' by the upper and middle classes, the introduction of the property-based poor rate meant that charitable aid was 'now opposed and discountenanced.'²⁵ An 1859 editorial in the *Daily Express* articulated how the funding of relief through the poor rate had absolved the propertied classes of their feelings of responsibility towards the poor: 'We lavishly bestow half a million of money to relieve poverty and destitution; we appoint a costly staff to administer the funds; ... we pay the money, and our conscience is at rest.'²⁶ The falling incomes of philanthropic and mendicity societies during the post-Famine period caused them to either cease or curtail their charitable activities.²⁷ The activities and effectiveness of many charitable societies were further constricted by their collection and distribution of resources along parallel denominational lines with little co-ordination between Protestant and Catholic organisations.²⁸

The availability of the workhouse as a source of relief for the most destitute poor was welcomed by some charitable societies as it allowed them to become more selective in the distribution of their resources. In 1842, a trustee of the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society of Dublin claimed that, 'the Poor Rate done [sic] a

²⁴ Ciara Breathnach, 'Infant life protection and medico-legal literacy in early twentieth-century Dublin', *Women's History Review*, 26 (2017), p. 788.

²⁵ Kohl, *Travels in Ireland*, p. 225.

²⁶ *Daily Express*, 3 Jun. 1859.

²⁷ Cousins, 'Philanthropy', p. 35; Crossman, 'Middle class attitudes', pp 131-2.

²⁸ Olwen Purdue, 'Surviving the industrial city: the female poor and the workhouse in late nineteenth-century Belfast', *Urban History*, 44 (2017), pp 75-9.

great deal of good ... because the Workhouse has weeded the City of those destitute' to whom the Society was 'heretofore ... obliged to give charity indiscriminately.'²⁹ Charities restricted the distribution of aid to applicants whose deservingness for support was evaluated by the cause of their poverty, their perceived respectability and morality, and their own capacity for self-help. Whereas the Sick and Indigent Roomkeepers' Society was willing to provide support to applicants 'who are doing a little for themselves', for 'those persons who cannot make a good use of the money' other than 'for the purpose of merely eating it', the Society would only 'recommend them to seek admission to the Workhouse.'³⁰ Alongside 'the deadening effect' of the poor rate upon public sympathies towards the destitute poor, the increased selectivity of charitable societies in the distribution of their resources restricted the extent to which many poor families were able to access charity as part of their economies of makeshifts.³¹

Attitudes among the middle-class public also became increasingly intolerant towards begging and the perceived economic exploitation of children by their families. Due to their deservingness as objects of charity, children enabled poor families to supplement their incomes by soliciting sympathy and aid from the public. Middle-class accounts of begging in the early nineteenth century alleged that poor parents were well skilled at using their children for this purpose. Several witnesses to the Poor Law Inquiry observed that the poor always 'bring their children with them' when begging door-to-door, while the inhabitants of towns frequently 'found the way blocked up by a ruddy-faced matron, surrounded by six or seven children, grouped with an artistic skill that would have done credit to Canova'.³² There were expectations that the introduction of statutory poor relief would end this apparent exploitation of children who 'mendicants drag along with them', since with the availability of workhouse

²⁹ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, [370], H.C. 1842, xxxvi, 15, pp 40-1.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, pp 59-60.

³² *First report from His Majesty's commissioners for inquiring into the condition of the poorer classes in Ireland*, [369], H.C. 1835, xxxii, 1, p. 155; O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 10.

relief, '[d]estitution will then be provided for, and mendicancy will be without excuse.'³³ The Irish Poor Law was thus envisaged by the propertied classes as a structured and institutional substitute to begging and informal charity.

The continuation of begging by poor families in the post-Famine era despite the provision of statutory poor relief and the criminalisation of begging under the Vagrancy Act of 1847, was a source of consternation for the ratepaying public.³⁴ Rather than statutory poor relief having reduced begging, the *Irish Times* alleged in 1869 that, '[s]ince the Poor Law the beggar's occupation has become more profitable' because the public felt compelled to give money 'not ... through charity or compassion but to get rid of annoying importunity.'³⁵ The condemnation of begging was expressed in terms of parental neglect, the dangers of begging to children's health and morality, and the loss of childhood innocence. One letter writer to the *Irish Times* complained of having been 'distressed in mind' by begging mothers who 'seek to extort charity by exposing to all the wretchedness of such a life their most unhappy offspring' who appeared as 'crabbed, rickety, puny dwarfs, their limbs without roundness or flesh, and not a vestige left of the freshness or grace of childhood.'³⁶ The exposure of children to public view by their begging parents, and the perception of beggars as a source of immorality within a public space, encouraged calls from the middle classes for greater state intervention on behalf of children against their 'exhibitor'.³⁷ In 1869, a public petition to the Chief Secretary demanded that children found begging be committed into the newly established industrial schools in order to enforce parental responsibility upon 'selfish parents who ... would be compelled to pay something towards the support of the child whose health they endangered and whose future they sacrificed.'³⁸ In the post-Famine era, poor families experienced more scrutiny from the public on

³³ Anon., 'The destitute poor of Ireland', p. 275.

³⁴ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 198-225.

³⁵ *Irish Times*, 31 Dec. 1869.

³⁶ *Irish Times*, 14 Feb. 1861.

³⁷ Ibid. See also: Gillian McIntosh, 'Children, street trading and the representation of public space in Edwardian Ireland' in Luddy and Smith (eds), *Children, childhood and Irish society*, pp 46-64.

³⁸ *Irish Times*, 31 Dec. 1869.

their use of begging within their survival strategies and of the roles of their children in their economies of makeshifts. Moreover, while the greater accessibility of statutory poor relief was the principal cause for its increased significance in the survival strategies of poor families, the concurrent constriction or closure of other avenues of charitable and informal support meant that many families were left with little option but to resort to either outdoor relief or admission into a workhouse.

III: Outdoor relief

Outdoor relief in the forms of weekly payments of money or food became an increasingly important element in the economy of makeshifts of certain categories of poor families from the 1870s onwards. As explored in Chapter One, access to outdoor relief was generally limited to families in the southern and western regions of Ireland and whose head of household was disabled or a widow with at least two legitimate children.³⁹ Families seeking outdoor relief were required to apply either in writing or in person to a Relieving Officer or the Board of Guardians. The examples below of outdoor relief applications to the North Dublin Board of Guardians in 1880 show that applicants stressed the deserving and pressing nature of their cases and referenced how many of their children would become liable for maintenance in the workhouse if outdoor relief was not granted:

1. From Finglas Dispensary District Medical Officer, regarding outdoor relief for family of 5, the mother of whom has asked him to support her application. The husband is in hospital for 5 months with fracture of his leg, and the family depended altogether on his earnings. Their means are exhausted.⁴⁰
2. From Margaret Wilson, stating her husband has been out of employment for the last eight months and that she has been struggling to clothe and support 6 children, the youngest of whom has been lying dangerously

³⁹ See: Chapter One, pp 21-7

⁴⁰ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1880. NAI, BG/78/A/73.

ill and without nourishment, and requesting outdoor relief to enable her to tide over this distress.⁴¹

3. From William Clarke, he has a wife and 6 children in a bad state, in fact utter destitution, requesting a little outdoor relief for a short time.⁴²
4. From Peter Caffery, in consequence of an accident and under a broken leg, he is still in very great distress and in need of outdoor relief for a short time longer having 7 helpless children in family.⁴³

Rather than undertake the full cost of the maintenance of such families in a workhouse, some Boards of Guardians preferred to provide small levels of outdoor relief to compensate families for the loss of income from the head of household and to provide time for them to adjust their economy of makeshifts. For example, in 1861, the South Dublin Board of Guardians approved a weekly allowance of 5lbs of bread worth 5s. to a family with six children whose father had lost his weekly wage of 10s. through sickness.⁴⁴ The Board of Guardians argued that this example ‘strongly exemplified’ the value of outdoor relief as the eldest boy was enabled to maintain his weekly income of 2s. 6d., ‘the mother managed to do a little’, and the Guardians avoided the expense of 21s. per week to maintain the family in the workhouse.⁴⁵

This practice of providing a family with some food or small sums of money as a supplement to their existing economy of makeshifts was criticised by some social commentators and poor relief officials as merely prolonging a family’s state of destitution and as detrimental to children’s health. Susanne Day, a Cork Poor Law Guardian, described this practice as the ‘crime called out-door relief’ in which ‘[e]conomy has come to be our first consideration’ with ‘the needs of the applicant and the purchasing power of money very secondary ones.’⁴⁶ Small amounts of outdoor

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1880. NAI, BG/78/A/74.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [408], H.C. 1861, x.1, 647, p. 210.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Susanne R. Day, ‘The crime called out-door relief’, *The Irish Review*, 2 (1912), pp 72-73.

relief were rarely enough to cover a family's expenses on rent, food, fuel, or clothing. Day argued that if outdoor relief were truly an alternative to the workhouse, then it 'must be given under circumstances that secure decent conditions of life to the recipient.'⁴⁷ The granting of small sums to women was especially criticised by Day who argued that such practice presumed 'that the widow or deserted wife, who suddenly finds herself with five, six, or more, young children to support, can supplement by her own efforts the meagre sum doled out to her.'⁴⁸

Other commentators maintained that small sums of outdoor relief ensured thriftiness among the poor. One proponent of this view suggested that a woman who failed to make ends meet with the assistance of a small outdoor relief allowance was obviously profligate and, therefore, 'the workhouse is not one bit too bad for her' and 'the children won't grow up the worse for the loss of her guidance.'⁴⁹ This method of keeping families out of the workhouse at the minimum expense persisted into the early twentieth century by which point small sums of outdoor relief had become an integral part of the economies of makeshifts of many poor families. In 1906, a Vice-Regal Commission reported that, '[i]nstead of outdoor relief being the sole support of the destitute, it has become merely an item in the receipts of the poor person.'⁵⁰ Yet, while the Commission noted that the provision of outdoor relief purposely as a supplement to other sources of income was 'not at all what was intended by the Poor-law', they did not advocate the cessation of this practice as 'the system seems to be popular, and it appears to have taken root.'⁵¹

As the Poor Law authorities believed that outdoor relief was particularly susceptible to fraud, they applied a greater level of scrutiny to applicants for outdoor relief than they did to families admitted into the workhouses. Relieving Officers were

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Morgan J. O'Connell, 'A plea for the poor hearth', *The Irish Monthly*, 7 (1879), p. 160.

⁵⁰ *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland*, [Cd 3202], H.C. 1906, li, 349, p. 66.

⁵¹ Ibid.

instructed to make detailed inquiries into the living conditions of each applicant, as well as on the contributions made by children to the family income. For instance, the North Dublin Relieving Officer recorded the following details of each applicant family:

names, ages, and earnings of all members of the family over 15 years, the school the children attend, and the standard of education of each child. Children street trading be so marked in the book. The rent and the number of rooms in each case. The occupation and earnings of the head of each family.⁵²

This information, along with ‘the amount each person receives’ in outdoor relief, was then printed by Boards of Guardians and ‘posted in the most conspicuous place in the town’, including market squares and places of worship, ‘where the ratepayers will have a chance of seeing for themselves in what manner this money is expended.’⁵³ The publishing of the names and economic circumstances of relief recipients was an attempt by Boards of Guardians to apply an element of deterrence to the provision of outdoor relief in the absence of the workhouse test.

The publication of the names of outdoor relief recipients encouraged the public to report on instances of suspected fraud by families. In 1880, the Local Government Board advised Guardians that, ‘information respecting the circumstances of persons receiving relief should be readily received from all trustworthy persons in the Union.’⁵⁴ However, allegations of fraud were usually made via anonymous letters that embellished the ways in which poor families spent their relief allowances. In a letter submitted to the North Dublin Board of Guardians, a woman named Nutty Byrne was alleged to have been ‘lending out any amount of money’ that she received as outdoor relief and that she was ‘charging each person 2d interest on every shilling’.⁵⁵ Upon

⁵² North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1910. NAI, BG/78/A/131.

⁵³ Clifden Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1884. GCCA, GPL3/58. See also: Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1880. NLI, MS 12654; Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1902. NLI, MS 12683.

⁵⁴ *Eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 2603], H.C. 1880, xxviii, 39, p. 41.

⁵⁵ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1882. NAI, BG/78/A/78.

investigation, however, the Relieving Officer reported that ‘she is a very poor widow having 2 helpless children with no means of subsistence but outdoor relief’, and that she had only once lent 4s. that she had received as outdoor relief ‘to a neighbour who offered to pay her 2d per shilling interest.’⁵⁶

When allegations resulted in the withdrawal of outdoor relief from a family, the former recipients could petition local clergy or sympathetic Poor Law Guardians to plead their case. For instance, in 1908, a Guardian of the Downpatrick Union argued before the Board that, ‘Mrs Quigley had [a] grant of 5s. per week taken away from her ... on account of irresponsible statements which have been made and which are not true.’⁵⁷ The Guardian stressed the deservingness of Quigley’s case as she ‘has five children depending on her’ with ‘no support except what she can get from her day’s work when that is forthcoming.’⁵⁸ The resumption of Quigley’s allowance was also argued by the Guardian as a financial benefit for the ratepayers on the basis that, ‘[i]t surely is preferable to grant 5/- a week to the woman’ as ‘the only alternative ... is that the children must be taken into the workhouse as inmates’.⁵⁹ Outdoor relief enabled families to supplement their incomes and thereby avoid admission into the workhouse, but its receipt also occasioned greater public scrutiny of a family’s economy of makeshifts.

IV: The workhouse

Indoor relief was another important element in the survival strategies of poor families. It is difficult to determine the extent of agency in a family’s decision to enter a workhouse, however. Historians’ depictions of workhouse inmates have ranged from ‘helpless victims powerless to do anything to alleviate their fate’, to an assessment of

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Downpatrick Board of Guardians Correspondence including forms of petition c. 1905-1911. PRONI, BG/12/BH/1.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the poor as having been ‘skilled at using the [workhouse] system to their own advantage’.⁶⁰ The question of agency in the decision to enter a workhouse is part of a wider debate on the level of control that families were able to exercise over their own survival strategies. An interpretation of the economy of makeshifts as a series of strategic decisions may overestimate the capacity of impoverished families to plan for the longer term and underplay conflict within the family group over decisions and the allocation of resources.⁶¹ To enter a workhouse was a voluntary decision, but it was one that was often preceded by a protracted series of efforts by families to alleviate their destitution by other means, while for others there were few alternative options. Some credence is thus given for the portrayal of the workhouse as a last resort into which ‘no one will go’ until ‘at the last gasp of hunger.’⁶² Whether children had opportunity to exercise agency within their family’s economy of makeshifts is uncertain, but the emphasis placed upon parental responsibility in Poor Law ideology meant that they were perceived by poor relief authorities as passive victims of their parents’ failure to independently provide for them. It was therefore deemed appropriate to apply the principle of less eligibility to the relief provided to parents but not to that given to children since, according to a North Dublin Guardian, the children ‘are not voluntary agents in coming in here.’⁶³

In many cases, poor families endured severe hardships to make ends meet and avoid making an application for workhouse relief. These hardships were sometimes endured over a protracted period and were detrimental to the physical and

⁶⁰ Dymphna McLoughlin, ‘Workhouses’ in Angela Bourke (ed.), *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing. Volume V: Irish women’s writing and traditions* (Cork, 2002), p. 722; Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland*, p. 2.

⁶¹ Laurence Fontaine and Jürgen Schlumbohm, ‘Household strategies for survival: an introduction’, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), pp 1-17; Jeremy Boulton, ‘“It is extreme necessity that makes me do this”: some “survival strategies” of pauper households in London’s West End during the early eighteenth century’, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), pp 47-69; Theo Engelen, ‘Labour strategies of families: a critical assessment of an appealing concept’, *International Review of Social History*, 47 (2002), pp 453-64; Jan Kok, ‘The challenge of strategy: a comment’, *International Review of Social History*, 47 (2002), pp 465-85.

⁶² *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 222.

⁶³ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children*, p. 59.

psychological health of members of a family. The insecurity of casual employment or charity meant that parents, particularly mothers, frequently had ‘to fast a day or two till the money comes round.’⁶⁴ McIntyre noted that a long period of fasting had left a woman who earned only 6d. each week towards the support of three children as ‘a perfect skeleton, sallow, shrunken and careworn ... sitting half-naked and in a very downcast condition.’⁶⁵ Women in families with two working parents experienced similar privations as, usually, ‘the women eat last and least.’⁶⁶ In mid nineteenth-century Belfast, many destitute families were living in an ‘unwholesome state’ because they were unable to wash themselves when ‘the price of soap was up’, or they were confined to their homes as the pawning of their clothes had rendered them ‘too naked’ to attend church or seek employment.⁶⁷ Some families were reported to have been willing to endure such hardships and ill-health rather than seek admission into a workhouse. One father was recorded as stating that he ‘would sooner work day and night than go to the workhouse’ with his family, while a young mother was ‘up every morning sewing ... by four o’clock and never to bed before eleven or twelve ... for some years till now her sight is greatly impaired’ in order to ‘as she said to keep herself and children out of the workhouse.’⁶⁸ The above representations of the struggles of poor families may have included some embellishments by their authors, but they serve nevertheless as reminders that the decision by a parent to seek admission into a workhouse for themselves and their children should be understood in a context of personal sacrifice and desperation.

The preservation of their respectability against the stigma of pauperism was one reason for which families attempted to avoid making an application for workhouse relief. Families who were classed among the ‘lowly struggling poor’ were reported as being prepared to make ‘every possible effort in an honest way to distinguish

⁶⁴ Diary kept by the Rev. Anthony McIntyre, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁶⁶ *Irish Times*, 28 Apr. 1914.

⁶⁷ Diary kept by the Rev. Anthony McIntyre, pp 1, 5-6, 38, 46.

⁶⁸ Ibid, pp 57, 85.

themselves from what to them appear shameful and disparaging – the recipients of workhouse relief.’⁶⁹ Such efforts often required the collective assistance of several poor families. In 1861, the philanthropist Ellen Woodlock reported that in Dublin there was ‘a large mass of destitution which poor relief never reaches’ because ‘the poor exhaust themselves to help their friends, rather than let them go into the workhouse.’⁷⁰ However, the capacity of neighbours or kin to give assistance to another family was dependent upon their own life-cycle circumstances and on the type of aid that was required.⁷¹ Although the Irish Poor Law had made poor relief more accessible, the manner of its provision in the workhouse made it an unattractive option for many families.

Poor relief authorities tended to view the avoidance of the workhouse by families who recognised themselves as truly destitute as irresponsible and potentially fatal. During the Great Famine, the Poor Law Commissioners claimed that the ‘determination of heads of families not to resign the occupation of land’ by which they would have made their families eligible for poor relief was ‘so great, that they have sacrificed their own lives or the lives of their children by postponing acceptance too long, or by refusing such relief altogether.’⁷² However, the continued occurrence of verdicts of ‘death from want’ among destitute families after the Great Famine, particularly in western counties, were attributed by some critics of the workhouse system as having been a direct consequence of the stigma of the workhouse and of the restrictions placed upon outdoor relief.⁷³ In October 1862, when the Tuam Board of

⁶⁹ *Seventh annual report of the directors of convict prisons in Ireland*, [2844], H.C. 1861, 145, p. 81.

⁷⁰ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 223.

⁷¹ Peter Lasslet, ‘Family, kinship and collectivity as systems of support in pre-industrial Europe: a consideration of the “nuclear-hardship” hypothesis’, *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), pp 153-75; Blaikie, ‘Nuclear hardship’, pp 272-6.

⁷² *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [963], H.C. 1847-48, xxxiii, 37, p. 13; *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 4-5.

⁷³ For examples, see: *Seventh annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1785], H.C. 1854, xxix, 531, pp 10-11; *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1945], H.C. 1854-55, xxiv, 523, pp 19-20.

Guardians refused to authorise outdoor relief despite the prevalence of distress, a local Presbyterian minister inquired whether the Guardians would instead supply coffins for ‘the interment of the multitude of persons who prefer suffering hunger, sickness and death outside rather than prolong a miserable existence within the workhouse.’⁷⁴ By their complete refusal or delayed acceptance of workhouse relief as a last resort in their survival strategies, families who deemed themselves as members of the respectable poor risked extreme privation, ill-health, and even death.

The enforced separation of families upon their admission into a workhouse was another reason for which families were reportedly willing to endure continued hardships rather than apply for indoor relief. The policy of family separation acted as a powerful psychological deterrent and it is generally considered by historians as ‘one of the cruellest aspects of the workhouse system.’⁷⁵ McIntyre recorded that when he asked several destitute families in Belfast why they had not applied for workhouse relief, one mother ‘wept bitterly at the thought of being separated from her children’ while another woman who was caring for her granddaughter explained to him that, “‘I would have gone to the workhouse but that little thing would be taken from me ... and she says she would rather die with me than leave me.’”⁷⁶ Children were admitted into the workhouse in a wide range of family circumstances and emotional states, however, and the fear of separation from parents affected some parents and children more than others. McLoughlin has argued that the diversity of family circumstances upon admission should lead us to expect a range of different emotional reactions towards the prospect of separation.⁷⁷ For instance, some orphaned or abandoned children may have viewed the workhouse as a refuge from a life on the streets, while families who were admitted for the first time or on an expected long-term basis may have found the

⁷⁴ Tuam Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1862. GCCA, GPL5/23.

⁷⁵ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 101.

⁷⁶ Diary kept by the Rev. Anthony McIntyre, pp 236, 346-7.

⁷⁷ McLoughlin, ‘Pauper children’, pp 288-9.

experience of separation as more emotionally difficult than was the case for families who repeatedly sought admission for short periods of time.⁷⁸

In most instances, however, separation was an emotionally difficult experience for parents and children. When a family was admitted into a workhouse, parents were sent to the respective male and female wards of the workhouse, although infants under the age of 2 were permitted to remain with their mothers in the nursery ward. All other children under the age of 15 were segregated into different classes according to their age and gender. Children were therefore separated from their siblings as well as from their parents. Susanne Day, a Cork Poor Law Guardian, described the reactions of women to their separation from their children:

... women screaming, cursing, or crying besieged the windows and doors demanding access to their offspring. One, a red-headed mother of twins, effected a dramatic entrance, and rushing across the room, seized a howling child, which promptly redoubled its vocal efforts. When the two were finally separated, the din was so awful we could not hear one another speak.⁷⁹

Additionally, some women in the Antrim workhouse were punished for refusing to allow their children to be taken away from them.⁸⁰ The Poor Law Commissioners recommended that parents should be allowed to see their children who were under 7 upon request and older children once each week.⁸¹ However, since Boards of Guardians retained discretion over the level of contact that was permitted between parents and children, separation was more absolute in some workhouses than others.

⁷⁸ For further discussion of the relationships between children's family circumstances and their emotional experiences in the workhouse, see, Jane Humphries, 'Care and cruelty in the workhouse: children's experiences of residential poor relief in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England' in Goose and Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and child labour*, pp 120-4.

⁷⁹ Susanne R. Day, *The amazing philanthropists: being extracts from the letters of Lester Martin, P.L.G.* (London, 1916), pp 48-9.

⁸⁰ Antrim Board of Guardians Offence and Punishment Book, 1871-1914. PRONI, BG/1/O/3.

⁸¹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 49.

Parents in the South Dublin workhouse were permitted a meeting once a week if their child was ill but only once a month if their child was healthy.⁸²

There were concerns among some social commentators and poor relief officials that the separation of families necessarily resulted in the estrangement of children from their parents and a permanent deadening of familial bonds of affection. In 1861, when asked before a parliamentary committee whether separation led to the breaking down of emotional bonds between children and their families, the South Dublin Guardian George Place stated that he had ‘no doubt of it’ for he had observed that ‘when they have been a long time in the workhouse they have no regard for their parents’, and that he knew of two sisters ‘who had been separated, and who did not know one another, or care one farthing for each other.’⁸³ One commentator wrote that for children in a workhouse, ‘Brother and sister, father and mother, are to them mere names they have heard ... but which bring to them none of the happy associations they excite in those whose childhood had passed more happily.’⁸⁴ The erosion of children’s affections towards their parents and siblings thus signified to middle-class observers a loss of childhood.

Recognising that separation undermined familial bonds, some Boards of Guardians allowed parents to have greater access to their children in the workhouses. In 1866, the Belfast Board of Guardians permitted parents to meet with their children at least twice a week, and more often upon request, ‘so as to keep alive the natural bond of affection between parent and child.’⁸⁵ The Guardians also expressed a hope that ‘the watchful care and supervision of the parent’ might assist the teachers in controlling unruly behaviour in the school. Yet, such concerns for the maintenance of families’ emotional bonds were less forthcoming from the central poor relief authorities who were more detached from the realities of workhouse life and were less

⁸² Ibid., p. 214.

⁸³ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 214.

⁸⁴ O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, p. 68.

⁸⁵ *Belfast News Letter*, 21 Nov. 1866.

willing to relax the policy of family separation. For example, in 1881, a Local Government Board inspector reminded officers of the South Dublin workhouse who wanted to permit more access between parents and children that, ‘attachment must give way to classification.’⁸⁶ Family separation was viewed by the central poor relief authorities as an important deterrence to ensure none but the truly destitute accessed the workhouse as part of their economy of makeshifts.

V: Conclusion

The family unit was of central importance to the ways in which poor relief was accessed and utilised by the poor and their children. This chapter has shown that poor relief was a key element alongside charity, begging, self-help, and mutual aid within the economies of makeshifts of poor families in post-Famine Ireland. The introduction of the Irish Poor Law marked a significant departure in the accessibility of statutory poor relief and welfare for the destitute poor. The greater accessibility of poor relief precipitated a shrinking of the range of other makeshifts available to some poor families, however, as charities became more selective of who received aid while the ratepaying public was increasingly intolerant of begging. Poor families also experienced greater scrutiny of how their children contributed towards their household budgets.

Outdoor relief was provided by some Boards of Guardians as a non-pauperising alternative to the workhouse, but it was deliberately granted as small sums that were intended to supplement other sources of income rather than provide for the complete relief of destitution. Yet, although the workhouse was a source of complete relief, the stigma of pauperism and the fear of separation from their children deterred many families from seeking admission. The reported preference of families to endure extreme privations rather than accept workhouse relief gives credibility to the

⁸⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 2 Nov. 1881.

representation of the institution as a last resort for the destitute poor. The admission of a family into a workhouse should therefore be understood as having followed either a short or long period of struggle by the family to remain outside the institution through the exploitation of a broad range of survival strategies to make ends meet.

Chapter Three

Families in the workhouse

I: Introduction

Admission into a workhouse was an important survival strategy in the economies of makeshifts of poor families during the post-Famine era. However, the ways in which the workhouse was accessed and utilised by families of different forms and circumstances is little understood by historians. Despite the reams of official statistical returns on the numbers of poor relief recipients, there is a near complete absence in these records of any statistics related to the familial circumstances and relationships of persons admitted into the workhouses. The categorisation in official statistics of relief recipients into separate classes of able-bodied adults, children, and the aged and infirm was useful for administrative purposes and reflected the spatial segregation of workhouse inmates. However, the classification of relief recipients into separate categories masked the existence and significance of familial relationships and affective bonds within and between classes of inmates. The lack of recorded information on children's families contributed towards both the common contemporary perception and the continued popular characterisation of pauper children as orphans without practical or affectionate family ties. Margaret Crowther has noted that the lack of official statistical returns concerning the family circumstances of children in receipt of indoor relief in England meant that New Poor Law policies involved 'a great deal of theory about the nature of the family' but were 'based upon little actual information about family structure.'¹ If the demographic reconstitution of the population in receipt of workhouse relief is limited to official statistical returns alone, historians risk replicating the administrative or ideological overlooking of children's family circumstances by poor relief authorities within their own methodologies and interpretations.

¹ Crowther, 'Family responsibility', p. 143.

This chapter is a statistical examination of the family forms and circumstances of children who were admitted into the workhouses. The analysis is based upon the entries that pertained to children as recorded in the admission and discharge registers of four workhouse case studies: Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles. A comparative study of these registers indicates the extent of local variations in the family forms, particularly between rural and urban workhouses. This analysis shows that children were admitted in a wide variety of family forms from which it is possible to interpret the manner and purpose for which such families accessed workhouse relief as part of their survival strategies. Although a large proportion of children were without parents, most children were accompanied by at least one parent into the workhouses. Family form and circumstances are shown to have been key determinants in how long a child tended to remain in a workhouse and whether a family faced additional barriers to relief due to hostility and moral judgements by workhouse officers.

II: Workhouse admission and discharge registers

An application for workhouse relief was a potentially lengthy and unpleasant process. Families had to personally apply for a written order of provisional admission, termed a 'line', from either a Poor Law Guardian or a Relieving Officer.² Even this first hurdle could prove arduous. The Relieving Officer's residence was sometimes poorly publicized or, as at Antrim where the Relieving Officer lived three miles from the workhouse, required a considerable journey by applicants.³ Lines were valid for three days, but they were generally redeemed immediately. In some workhouses, families were required to appear before a committee of Guardians who decided whether to approve or reject the application. In urban workhouses with large numbers of

² *General order for regulating the management of workhouses and the duties of the workhouse officers, 5 February 1849* as quoted in Thomas A. Mooney, *Compendium of the Irish Poor Law* (Dublin, 1887), pp 283-4.

³ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1858. PRONI, BG/1/A/7.

applicants, families queued outside for hours before their interview. A North Dublin Guardian said that this was especially hard for children who, after ‘being exposed three or four hours to the blast that comes in at the gate’, were ‘so famished and cold that they could scarcely walk into the Room.’⁴ In what must have been a humiliating experience, families had to tell the committee ‘a pitiable story about their destitution.’⁵ The North Dublin Guardians occasionally asked families to leave the boardroom during the discussions about their case ‘for the sake of sparing the feelings of those people.’⁶ Families admitted to the Thurles workhouse remained present, however, and they were allegedly forbidden to speak while the Guardians discussed their case in front of them.⁷ The rejection of families with children was rare, however.⁸ Once admitted, families were sent to the probationary ward where they were washed, medically examined, issued with a uniform, and separated to their respective wards.

Upon their admission into a workhouse, each family member had their personal details recorded into the admission and discharge register. These registers are the main source of evidence used in this chapter for the identification of children and for the statistical analysis of their family circumstances. The register entry for an individual usually included their name, age, sex, marital status, religion, occupation, last place of residence, observations on their health and appearance, as well as the dates of their admission and discharge or death. The entries for children also recorded their legitimacy and whether they were an orphan or had been abandoned by their parents. Registers were printed in a standardised format which was used across all workhouses, but the accuracy of the information recorded and the consistency to which register entries were completed varied between workhouses and over time.

⁴ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, p. 38.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Barry, *Life in an Irish workhouse* (Thurles, 1890), p. 42.

⁸ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 113.

There were several factors behind inconsistencies in the completion of the registers. Relief applicants themselves were likely to have been a major source of inaccuracies as they may have either purposely withheld information from officials or were ignorant of their age or the spelling of their name. A South Dublin Guardian noted that, 'the difficulty of any classification in the workhouse' based upon the registers was 'owing to the incorrect statements people make.'⁹ Poor record keeping by workhouse officers was a further cause of inaccuracies. Most notably, in 1880, the Belfast Board of Guardians were 'bamboozled' by the registers that had been completed by the Assistant-Master because 'mythical names were returned on the books' and 75 persons listed in the registers could not be found in the workhouse.¹⁰ Such inaccuracies in the registers of urban workhouses may have been a product of the greater numbers and more rapid turnover of relief applicants in comparison to rural workhouses. Workhouse officers also tended to leave blank the register columns that they considered non-essential and they sometimes repurposed columns for different information such as the time of admission. Additionally, the language barrier between some applicants and workhouse officers may have contributed to errors in the registers for workhouses in southern and western regions. For example, at Tuam in 1848, over 75 per cent of relief applicants could 'understand the Irish language only', but the workhouse officers were reportedly 'ignorant of said language' and 'consequently incompetent to investigate the claims of applicants for relief.'¹¹ Nevertheless, workhouse admission and discharge registers were usually the only place in which the identities and circumstances of relief applicants were documented in Poor Law records. With the absence of census returns for the nineteenth century, these registers represent an invaluable source for the demographic study of the poor and labouring classes in Ireland.

⁹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 203.

¹⁰ See: *Belfast News Letter*, 20 Nov. 1880; *Copies of minutes of evidence taken at the recent inquiry held at the Belfast Workhouse by inspectors Bourke and Brodie*, [C 123], H.C. 1881, lxxix, 69, pp 8-9.

¹¹ Tuam Town Commissioners, 30 Jun. 1848. GCCA, TTC/1/1, p. 126.

The statistical methodology adopted in this chapter has been modelled on the methodologies used in recent quantitative studies of the inmate populations of workhouses in England. These studies have reconstituted populations from the information in admission and discharge registers as well as from census enumerators' returns.¹² Although the differences in terms of the administration and accessibility of relief between the New Poor Law in England and Wales and its Irish counterpart preclude a direct comparison of the populations of English workhouses with the analysis presented herein, these existing studies provide a useful methodological guide for the examination of workhouse registers. These studies show that admission and discharge registers were more informative than census enumerators' returns for identifying families in the workhouse and for inferring the reasons for which they sought admission. The English studies have shown that variations should be expected in the composition of workhouse populations on account of different local economic conditions and the idiosyncratic administrative practices adopted by Board of Guardians. Audrey Perkyns' statistical study of children in the Milton workhouse is particularly relevant to this chapter. Through a statistical analysis of different family forms, Perkyns has shown that families were admitted in a wide range of forms that were highly fluid and that there was an overrepresentation of children admitted as part of single parent families, especially children with unmarried mothers.¹³

In the Irish context, a common statistical methodology was applied by several studies under the recent *Welfare Regimes Under the Irish Poor Law* research project to the admission and discharge registers of several workhouses.¹⁴ The methodology

¹² See: Hinde and Turnbull, 'The populations of two Hampshire workhouses', pp 38-53; Goose, 'Workhouse populations in the mid-nineteenth century', pp 52-69; Jackson, 'Kent workhouse populations', pp 51-66; Jackson, 'The Medway Union workhouse', pp 11-32; Perkyns, 'The admission of children', pp 59-77; Seal, 'Workhouse populations in the Cheltenham and Belper Unions', pp 83-100; Gritt and Park, 'The workhouse populations of Lancashire', pp 37-65; Darwen, 'Workhouse populations of the Preston Union', pp 35-53; Samantha Williams, 'Unmarried mothers and the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 91 (2013), pp 27-43; Purser, 'The workhouse population of the Nottingham Union', pp 66-80.

¹³ Perkyns, 'The admission of children', pp 74-6.

¹⁴ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 101-38; Purdue, 'Poor relief in the north of Ireland', pp 23-36; Lucey, 'Poor relief in the west of Ireland', pp 37-52; Laragy, 'Poor relief in the south of Ireland', pp 53-66.

used in these case studies comprised of the transcription and analysis of the entries recorded annually within the registers at 10-year intervals.¹⁵ Such analysis has indicated that the inmate populations were diverse, and that the reasons for which the poor accessed relief and the ways in which they used the workhouse diverged along regional lines and between rural and urban localities over the post-Famine period. However, the scope of the analysis in these studies has been upon the aggregate numbers of relief recipients and they include limited examination of the range of family forms and circumstances within the workhouses. There is therefore a need for a comparative analysis of the admission and discharge registers of multiple workhouses to assess the extent to which the family forms of children in receipt of indoor relief varied between regions and over time.

This chapter presents a statistical analysis of the family forms of children recorded in the workhouse admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses at 10-year intervals between 1850-51 and 1910-11.¹⁶ Where a register has not survived for a particular year, the register for the next closest available year has been examined instead where possible. The survivability of registers for 1850-51 is poor. The chapter examines the extent to which the numbers and percentages of different family forms varied by locality. To achieve this, the register entries of children have been transcribed into a database with additional details recorded on the marital status, ages, and occupations of their parents, as well as the length of stay of each family member in the workhouse. The identification of families in the registers is usually straightforward. When admitted together, family members were recorded consecutively from father to mother and from the oldest to the youngest child, with each child identified as ‘child of’ the parents recorded before them. This methodology was tested in a comparative study of children

¹⁵ In these previous studies, a different methodology was applied to the Belfast admission and discharge registers for which only the entries from the months of January, April, July, and October of each year under examination were transcribed and studied.

¹⁶ A year in this analysis is synonymous with the Irish Poor Law administrative year of October to September inclusive.

recorded in the registers of the Antrim, Ballymena, and Ballymoney workhouses in 1850-51 and 1860-61.¹⁷ The test study found variations in the population compositions of each workhouse but also common trends in the percentage representation of children's family forms; while orphaned and deserted children predominated after the Great Famine, most children were admitted with only their mothers in 1860-61. Although the examination of registers at intervals risks the analysis of years which were subject to unique or cyclical fluctuations, the volume of register data examined herein is enough to provide an indication of whether children's family forms varied over time and by locality during the post-Famine era.

III: Children's family forms and circumstances

The family forms in which children were admitted into the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses are set out in Table 2 into five categories: without either parent, with both parents, with a father only, with a mother only, or with a relative other than a parent. Although the register data represents the total number of admissions during a year rather than the average daily inmate population, the trends in the numbers of children admitted in total were similar to those observed in the statistical returns analysed in Chapter One. There was a peak in the numbers of children admitted into the rural workhouses of Ballymoney and Thurles in the 1880s but a slight decline overall over the course of the post-Famine era. The greater scale of admissions to urban workhouses is clear from Table 2 but there were notable fluctuations in the numbers of children admitted into the North Dublin workhouse in comparison to Belfast. Except for the 1890-91 register for North Dublin, the records show that the numbers of children admitted into urban workhouses increased significantly during the second half of the nineteenth century, but these numbers subsequently fell during the early twentieth century.

¹⁷ Simon A. Gallaher, 'Children and families in the workhouse populations of the Antrim, Ballymena, and Ballymoney Poor Law Unions in the mid-nineteenth century', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp 81-94.

Table 2: The family forms of children admitted into the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	No parents	Both parents	Father only	Mother only	Other relative	Total	
		%	%	%	%	%	n	%
Ballymoney	1850-51	41.4	3.6	3.6	51.4	0.0	140	100.0
	1860-61	13.8	16.0	10.1	60.1	0.0	188	100.0
	1870-71	19.1	11.4	4.3	64.3	0.9	115	100.0
	1880-81	12.1	23.2	2.6	62.1	0.0	232	100.0
	1890-91	22.5	11.3	7.4	58.8	0.0	80	100.0
	1900-01	17.2	34.3	0.6	47.9	0.0	169	100.0
	1910-11	21.8	36.6	0.0	41.6	0.0	101	100.0
Belfast	1864-65	37.4	4.3	4.0	54.2	0.1	1,197	100.0
	1877-78	26.2	5.6	2.7	65.4	0.1	1,480	100.0
	1890-91	18.1	5.2	1.5	75.0	0.2	3,289	100.0
	1900-01	29.6	7.2	2.3	60.7	0.2	3,337	100.0
	1910-11	46.4	3.9	3.4	46.3	0.0	2,677	100.0
North Dublin	1860-61	25.9	7.4	2.9	63.6	0.0	687	100.0
	1870-71	34.8	3.8	4.2	57.2	0.0	813	100.0
	1880-81	21.5	11.3	5.1	62.1	0.0	1,716	100.0
	1890-91	36.8	4.2	2.1	56.6	0.3	574	100.0
	1900-01	16.7	11.3	0.8	71.0	0.3	3,429	100.0
	1910-11	60.1	8.7	2.1	29.1	0.0	1,357	100.0
Thurles	1870-01	34.5	13.6	5.1	46.3	0.6	177	100.0
	1879-80	44.9	8.0	2.2	44.9	0.0	325	100.0
	1889	10.1	42.3	0.8	46.3	0.4	473	100.0
	1900-01	9.8	25.2	2.4	62.4	0.2	449	100.0
	1910-11	34.6	8.2	7.7	49.5	0.0	208	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

The percentage of children without their parents varied between workhouses and fluctuated over time. In Ballymoney, unaccompanied children represented 41.4 per cent of children in 1850-51, a year which covered the closing stage of the Great Famine, but they fell to 13.8 per cent in 1860-61 and, barring the low of 12.1 per cent in 1880-81, fluctuated at around a fifth of children in the subsequent registers. At Belfast, unaccompanied children declined from 37.4 per cent in 1864-65, the first available register, to 18.1 per cent in 1890-91 and then increased considerably to 46.4 per cent in 1910-11. Unaccompanied children remained as a large percentage of children in North Dublin in each register studied from 1860-61 onwards except for 1900-01 when, while their numbers had increased, they represented only 16.7 per cent. As with Belfast, the percentage of unaccompanied children in North Dublin was highest in the 1910-11 register. In Thurles, the percentage of children without parents was highest at 44.9 per cent 1879-80, declined to approximately a tenth of children in 1889 and 1900-01, but then increased to 34.6 per cent in 1910-11.

Children with both their father and mother were a consistently small percentage admitted to urban workhouses, although their percentage fluctuated to a greater extent at North Dublin than at Belfast. In the rural workhouses, children admitted with both parents usually comprised larger percentages, particularly at Thurles in 1889 and 1900-01 and at Ballymoney in 1880-81, 1900-01, and 1910-11. The percentage of children without parents was higher in the post-Famine era than during the Great Famine when they accounted for only 3.6 per cent of children in Ballymoney in 1850-51. The most common family form was children admitted with a single parent. Children with either their father or mother accounted for the majority of admissions recorded in almost all of the registers. In all four case studies, children admitted with only their mother vastly outnumbered children admitted with only their father. Children admitted with only their mother were the most numerous family form in each year bar the 1879-80 register for Thurles and the 1910-11 registers for Belfast and North Dublin. Children accompanied by only their mothers accounted for particularly high percentages of children in urban workhouses. Most notably, children with only their mothers

represented 75.0 per cent of children in Belfast in 1890-91 and 71.0 per cent in North Dublin in 1900-01.

Table 2 shows that children were rarely admitted with relatives other than their parents. The low incidence of other relatives may have reflected the onus placed within Irish Poor Law ideology on parents to provide for their direct dependents. Wider kin were not included within the ‘whole family’ principle and were not legally required to enter the workhouse with a child who was not their own. However, wider kin played an important role in the survival strategies of poor families. Jane Gray has shown that it was common practice by poor parents to place their children in the care of relatives during periods of financial difficulty.¹⁸ Whether some children who were admitted without parents had been deposited at a workhouse by such relatives is unclear from the registers, but studies of welfare institutions elsewhere in Europe have detailed that this practice occurred to a limited extent on the continent.¹⁹ The few instances of such practice that were recorded in the minute books of Irish Boards of Guardians indicate that relatives brought children to the workhouse so as to initiate prosecutions against parents for desertion. For example, in 1891, James and Luke Fallon, aged 12 and 10 respectively, were brought to the North Dublin workhouse by their grandmother who ‘was no longer able to maintain them’ because their father ‘for some time past failed to contribute anything to their support’.²⁰ The children were admitted, and the father was prosecuted for their maintenance at the grandmother’s request. In the 1864-65 Belfast register, 33 children were recorded upon their discharge as having been sent to aunts, grandmothers, and ‘friends’ which implies that

¹⁸ Jane Gray, ‘The circulation of children in rural Ireland during the first half of the twentieth century’, *Continuity and Change*, 29 (2014), pp 399-421.

¹⁹ Guy Brunet, ‘Children abandoned and taken back: children, women, and families in dire straits in Lyon in the nineteenth century’, *Journal of Family History*, 36 (2011), pp 430-3; Montserrat Carbonell-Esteller and Julie Marfany, ‘Gender, life-cycle, and family “strategies” among the poor: the Barcelona workhouse, 1762-1805’, *Economic History Review*, 70 (2017), pp 810-36.

²⁰ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1891. NAI, BG/78/A/95.

wider kin and neighbours played a more conspicuous role in the removal of children from a workhouse.²¹

To interpret the reasons for which families entered a workhouse, it is necessary to examine each family form in more detail and introduce subcategories based upon the varied circumstances of children. Table 3 details the different familial circumstances of children without a parent: orphaned, abandoned, sent to the workhouse alone for hospital treatment, had a parent in the workhouse already, had a parent in prison, or unaccompanied for another unstated reason. As may be expected at the close of Great Famine, a large majority of children without parents in the 1850-51 Ballymoney register were either orphaned or abandoned. This was also the case in several neighbouring workhouses in County Antrim.²² At Ballymoney, while the percentage of abandoned children increased in 1860-61 but fell to a low level thereafter, the percentage of orphaned children initially fell but again accounted for large percentages of unaccompanied children in 1880-81, 1890-91, and 1900-01. At 24.2 and 38.2 per cent, orphans represented a significant proportion of unaccompanied children in Belfast in 1864-65 and North Dublin in 1860-61 respectively. However, it is probable that these percentages were significantly lower than they had been during the early 1850s.

In the two urban workhouses, orphaned children were a small percentage of unaccompanied children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This decline appears to have occurred earlier at Belfast, but to a greater extent in North Dublin. Abandoned children were consistently larger percentages of unaccompanied children in North Dublin than at Belfast, but these percentages declined in both workhouses over the period. At Thurles, orphaned and deserted children accounted for small percentages of unaccompanied children in the late nineteenth century and they were not present at all in the 1900-01 and 1910-11 registers. Together, orphaned

²¹ Belfast Board of Guardians Indoor Register, Jul. 1864 – Apr. 1865. PRONI, BG/7/G/1.

²² Gallaher, 'Children and families', p. 89.

Table 3: The family circumstances of children admitted without parents into the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	Orphaned		Deserted		Hospital		Parent in workhouse		Parent in prison		Not stated		Total	
		%		%		%		%		%		%		n.	%
Ballymoney	1850-51	51.7		20.7		15.5		3.4		0.1		8.6		58	100.0
	1860-61	15.4		30.8		0.0		11.5		11.5		30.8		26	100.0
	1870-71	4.5		0.0		13.6		13.6		0.0		68.3		22	100.0
	1880-81	46.4		10.7		10.7		7.1		0.0		25.1		28	100.0
	1890-91	50.0		5.6		0.0		5.6		0.0		38.8		18	100.0
	1900-01	48.3		0.0		31.0		10.3		3.4		7.0		29	100.0
	1910-11	0.0		0.0		68.2		0.0		0.0		31.8		22	100.0
Belfast	1864-65	24.2		8.7		47.9		4.9		3.6		10.7		447	100.0
	1877-78	5.2		3.4		43.6		9.8		2.1		35.9		388	100.0
	1890-91	5.6		4.9		30.9		3.5		9.1		46.0		593	100.0
	1900-01	3.2		1.2		51.3		2.8		2.3		39.2		988	100.0
	1910-11	3.4		0.6		60.3		3.4		0.2		32.1		1,241	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

Table 3 (cont.): The family circumstances of children admitted without parents into the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	Orphaned		Deserted		Hospital		Parent in workhouse		Parent in prison		Not stated		Total	
		%		%		%		%		%		%		n.	%
North Dublin	1860-61	38.2		29.8		15.2		6.7		1.7		8.4		178	100.0
	1870-71	17.0		10.2		2.5		4.9		0.0		65.4		283	100.0
	1880-81	10.2		15.2		10.6		0.0		0.0		64.0		283	100.0
	1890-91	3.8		7.1		15.2		0.9		0.0		73.0		211	100.0
	1900-01	2.1		3.5		30.5		7.0		3.5		53.4		571	100.0
	1910-11	1.1		2.3		15.7		0.1		0.0		80.8		815	100.0
Thurles	1870-01	8.2		14.8		55.7		0.0		3.3		18.0		61	100.0
	1879-80	11.0		2.7		82.2		0.7		0.0		3.4		146	100.0
	1889	2.1		6.3		29.2		4.2		2.1		56.1		48	100.0
	1900-01	0.0		0.0		50.0		2.3		0.0		47.7		44	100.0
	1910-11	0.0		0.0		70.8		0.0		0.0		29.2		72	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

and abandoned children thus accounted for large percentages of unaccompanied children in Ballymoney in 1850-51, as well as in the urban workhouses in 1860-61, but their numbers and percentages had decreased considerably in the case study workhouses, bar Ballymoney, by the late nineteenth century.

In most registers, large percentages of unaccompanied children were admitted for hospital treatment. At Belfast and Thurles, sickness represented the most common reason given for the admission of unaccompanied children in each year. As will be shown in Chapter Seven, workhouse infirmaries and fever hospitals, originally limited to pauper inmates, were made available from the mid-1850s onwards as a form of non-pauperising medical relief for the sick poor.²³ Crucially, parents were not required to enter the workhouse if their child was admitted for medical treatment. Before 1900-01, few children appear to have been admitted for medical relief at Ballymoney in contrast to the situation at the other workhouses. This difference may have reflected the later medicalisation of the Ballymoney workhouse compared to the larger Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses. The percentage of sick children in North Dublin was consistently lower than Belfast which was likely due to the wider availability of medical institutions for the sick poor in Dublin. The Thurles workhouse operated as a major provincial hospital throughout this period. The peak of 82.2 per cent of unaccompanied children admitted as sick in Thurles in 1879-80 likely reflected the prevalence of infectious diseases during a subsistence crisis. It is probable that the statistics in Table 3 were an underestimation for the numbers of unaccompanied children admitted as hospital patients, however, as they represent only the register entries of children who were explicitly recorded as sick or in need of medial relief.

Low numbers of children had parents who were already inmates or hospital patients. Others were sent to the workhouses while their parents were imprisoned. Prisons were deemed unsuitable environments for children because of the perceived risk of moral contamination by adult prisoners.²⁴ This policy was set out in 1843 when

²³ See: Chapter Seven, pp 224-33.

²⁴ Farrell, ““Poor prison flowers””, pp 181-5.

the Board of Supervision for prisons in Ireland warned of a 'great danger' if the children of criminal parents were sent to prison as it would 'thereby force them at a period of life, when very susceptible of bad impressions, into contact with vicious characters'.²⁵ The Poor Law Commissioners agreed that such children were 'well worthy of the merciful consideration of the guardians' and 'would never be turned from the gates unless when the house was so full.'²⁶ In Ulster workhouses, there were reportedly thousands of children whose parents had been imprisoned for begging or vagrancy, and that Boards of Guardians communicated with imprisoned parents to ensure they removed their children upon release.²⁷ Some Boards of Guardians were not wholly supportive of this policy. The Belfast Board accepted such children only with the proviso that their parents remained liable for the cost of their children's maintenance 'by way of loan', and the North Dublin Guardians complained that the admission of these children was 'contributing to swell the enormous number who become a burthen on the rate payers.'²⁸ From 1868, children of imprisoned parents were generally committed to industrial schools which were considered as less stigmatising than workhouses.²⁹

The considerable decline in the numbers and percentages of orphans and abandoned children admitted into the workhouses needs further exploration. Orphanage and abandonment appear to have been most prevalent during periods of economic and social distress, particularly during the Great Famine, which occasioned the widespread disintegration of families through the deaths or emigration of parents. As discussed in Chapter One, large numbers of children were admitted as orphans or were left as such under false pretences either temporarily or permanently by their emigrating parents during the Great Famine.³⁰ During the post-Famine era, there was

²⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 13 Jan. 1843.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, [674], H.C. 1852-53, xxiii, 567, p. 393.

²⁸ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/35; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1870. NAI, BG/78/A/55.

²⁹ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 65-7.

³⁰ See: Chapter One, pp 41-50.

no repeat to the same scale of the distress and family disintegration of the late 1840s and so the percentages of orphans and abandoned children in the workhouses were consequently lower in the decades after the disaster. However, the increased percentages of orphans in the 1879-80 register for Thurles and the 1880-81 and 1900-01 registers for Ballymoney corresponded with periods of regional subsistence crises. Furthermore, the establishment of alternative forms of welfare for orphans and abandoned children during the post-Famine era meant that only a fraction of them were admitted into the workhouses. Protestant and Catholic philanthropists and religious orders founded multiple orphan societies and industrial schools to keep orphaned children out of the workhouses and protected from what was considered a degrading and demoralising pauper childhood.³¹

The abandonment of children continued after the Great Famine but to a more limited extent. Several historians have argued that unmarried mothers were the most likely category of parent to have abandoned their infant children at the workhouse gate or to have attempted to leave the workhouse without their child.³² For such women, an illegitimate child would have limited their ability to find employment or receive assistance from friends and family due to the loss of respectability. The abandonment of a child at a workhouse was a difficult decision that was taken in desperation. In one example of the prosecution of an unmarried mother for desertion, Annie Orr was charged with abandoning her child at the Belfast workhouse gate in March 1901. She explained that she had left her child because she ‘wanted to be free to earn money’ but, when walking away, had ‘heard the child crying’ and so ‘went back for it’ only to have seen it held by another woman.³³ The relatively low incidence of abandonment in the registers from 1870-71 through to 1910-11 may have partly reflected the punitive

³¹ Cooper, *The Protestant Orphan Society*, p. 36.

³² Dymphna McLoughlin, ‘Workhouses and Irish female paupers, 1840-70’ in Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds), *Women surviving* (Dublin, 1989), pp 132-6; Elaine Farrell, ‘*A most diabolical deed*’: *infanticide and Irish society, 1850-1900* (Manchester, 2013), pp 92-3.

³³ Annie Orr – child neglect. Bill No. 56. PRONI, BELF/1/1/2/4/10.

policies taken by Boards of Guardians to deter parents from leaving their children in the workhouse.

Boards of Guardians adopted a range of measures to deter abandonment and enforce parental responsibility. Some Boards instructed their officers to interview the children in the workhouse schools to find out whether any had been abandoned and whether they knew the whereabouts of either their parents or of other relatives.³⁴ These inquiries resulted in the removal of abandoned children in only a few instances.³⁵ In 1862, a particularly direct approach was adopted by the North Dublin Board of Guardians who ordered that the ‘relieving officer take the deserted children down to the neighbourhood ... and endeavour to get the child to point out its former residence.’³⁶ Arrest warrants were issued for parents who abandoned their children and financial rewards were advertised in newspapers for information that led to a conviction. The Thurles Board of Guardians inserted descriptions of abandoned children into local newspapers and the Belfast Board ordered that the clothes of abandoned children ‘be exhibited daily’ on the street where they were found.³⁷ Convicted parents faced imprisonment of one to three months and, if they were deemed able to pay, they were ordered to reimburse the Board of Guardians for the cost of the children’s maintenance in the workhouse. Yet, the prosecution of parents rarely resulted in the recuperation of costs for the maintenance of children due to the poverty of parents.³⁸ In many cases, such proceedings were probably conducted more with a

³⁴ See: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/17.

³⁵ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1852. NAI, BG/78/A/19; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1862. NAI, BG/78/A/40; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1872. NAI, BG/78/A/58.

³⁶ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1862. NAI, BG/78/A/40. See also: Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1851. NLI, MS 12614; Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1871. NLI, MS 12646.

³⁷ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1871. TS, BG/151/A/53; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/23.

³⁸ The North Dublin Relieving Officers encountered numerous obstacles to the recuperation of costs from prosecuted parents, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1852. NAI, BG/78/A/18; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/56; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1901. NAI, BG/78/A/115.

view towards the principled enforcement of parental responsibility and as a deterrence against other parents from leaving their children in the workhouses.³⁹

There is evidence that Boards of Guardians allowed some parents to leave their children in the workhouses for short periods of time even though such practice technically qualified as abandonment under the regulations of the Irish Poor Law. McLoughlin has termed this practice of negotiated parental absence as a ‘system of condoned desertion’ by which children were admitted during periods of parental unemployment or sickness in order to avoid the admission of the whole family into the workhouse.⁴⁰ The minute books of several Boards of Guardians record that this practice occurred to a limited extent and was applied for by families in a similar manner to requests for outdoor relief. In September 1851, the children of the Wilson family were admitted into the Antrim workhouse without their parents ‘by way of loan’ as the family faced eviction and could not afford to feed their children.⁴¹ In two cases from North Dublin in 1871, the Board of Guardians agreed to a written request from a father to ‘admit his 4 little girls into the house for a while as he is in the Dublin artillery militia and will be going out for training for 6 weeks’, and they consented also to admit a 14 year old boy whose stepmother ‘is very destitute herself ... having 2 other children to support through her own industry.’⁴² Families stressed the deservingness of their case, their willingness to contribute toward the cost of their children’s maintenance, and they highlighted the necessity for the entire family to be supported upon the poor rate should their application have been refused. For example, at Tuam in 1911, a father informed the Guardians that, ‘[o]wing to his wife being in hospital he found it very difficult to look after his three children having no one to aid him’, but he added that, ‘if the Board would kindly take them into the workhouse he would willingly pay a

³⁹ See: Thomas Nutt, ‘Illegitimacy, paternal financial responsibility, and the 1834 Poor Law Commission report: the myth of the old poor law and the making of the new’, *Economic History Review*, 63 (2010), pp 335-61; Samantha Williams, ‘The maintenance of bastard children in London, 1790-1834’, *Economic History Review*, 69 (2016), pp 945-71.

⁴⁰ McLoughlin, ‘Pauper children’, pp 301, 303.

⁴¹ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1851. PRONI, BG/1/A/2.

⁴² North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/56.

small sum until such time that his wife comes out.’⁴³ The father stated further that if he were ‘compelled to go into the workhouse with his children he would lose his means of earnings’ and thereby burden the Board with the cost of maintaining the whole family on a more permanent basis.⁴⁴ The prevalence of condoned deserted should not be overstated as the number of recorded instances was small as it was granted only to families of the respectable poor, and it was disapproved of by the central poor relief authorities.⁴⁵

The temporary abandonment of children in the workhouses was usually of a much less negotiated character. Some urban workhouse officers suggested that families often sent their children unaccompanied into the workhouse for hospital treatment with no intention of taking them back out.⁴⁶ The Medical Officer of the North Dublin workhouse claimed that there was ‘a practice existing amongst some women having children’ whereby they ‘leave the workhouse with a young child and get the child readmitted under the plea of illness without the mother’ for the purpose of abandonment.⁴⁷ In 1891, the North Dublin Board of Guardians attempted to prevent such deception through an order that, ‘in all cases of sick children under the age of 2 years, the mother if alive, and available, should accompany the child to hospital and remain an inmate of the workhouse until the child’s recovery or discharge.’⁴⁸ The poor relief authorities generally held that children who were left in the workhouses were ‘absolutely and wholly abandoned’ by their parents who ‘feel relieved of a weighty burden’.⁴⁹ As with the examples of negotiated absences, some instances of abandonment may have reflected the ways in which families, perhaps unable to solicit

⁴³ Tuam Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1911. GCCA, GPL5/100.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ For examples, see: Newry Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1845. PRONI, BG/2/A/3; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/56; Tuam Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1907. GCCA, GPL5/95.

⁴⁶ Day, *The amazing philanthropists*, p. 153.

⁴⁷ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1891. NAI, BG/78/A/94.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *The Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 635; Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 186.

authorities' acquiescence, left their children in a workhouse during periods of distress as part of their economy of makeshifts.

Children with one parent were the most common family composition in all registers bar 1879-80 for Thurles and 1910-11 for Belfast and Dublin. This suggests that families with a single parent were particularly vulnerable to destitution, but there was a gendered disparity in this vulnerability. The small numbers of children admitted with only their father were generally either the children of widowers or of married men whose wives were already in the workhouse hospital or were imprisoned. In the Belfast registers, for instance, the percentages of 'father only' children who were admitted with a widowed father were 41.7 per cent in 1864-65, 60.0 per cent in 1877-78, 78.3 per cent in 1890-91, 43.2 per cent in 1900-01, and 76.6 per cent in 1910-11. In contrast, most of the children recorded as part of single parent families in every register were with their mother only. Numerous studies have highlighted the prevalence of single motherhood among pauper women, which was due to the difficulties experienced by abandoned wives, widows, and unmarried mothers in their efforts to support themselves and their children.⁵⁰

Children who were admitted in 'mother only' families are categorised in Table 4 according to their mother's marital status. In all four workhouses during this period, there was an upwards trend in the percentage of children admitted with married mothers. These percentages were particularly high in the two urban workhouses and Thurles by the early twentieth century, although Ballymoney and Belfast had lower percentages of children of married mothers than North Dublin or Thurles. At Ballymoney, the percentage of children of married mothers increased from 22.2 per cent in 1850-51 to 57.1 per cent by 1910-11. The percentage represented by children

⁵⁰ McLoughlin, 'Workhouses and Irish female paupers', pp 117-47; Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800-1940* (Cambridge, 2007), pp 38-60; Maria Luddy, 'Unmarried mothers in Ireland, 1880-1973', *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011), pp 110-12; Olwen Purdue, "'A gigantic system of casual pauperism': the contested role of the workhouse in late nineteenth-century Belfast" in Beate Althammer et al (eds), *The welfare state and the 'deviant' poor in Europe, 1870-1933* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp 42-57; Purdue, 'Surviving the industrial city', pp 69-90.

Table 4: The family circumstances of children admitted with only their mother into the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	Mother married	Mother deserted	Mother widowed	Mother unmarried	Total	
		%	%	%	%	n.	%
Ballymoney	1850-51	22.2	15.3	36.1	26.4	72	100.0
	1860-61	35.4	11.5	20.4	32.7	113	100.0
	1870-71	32.4	0.0	33.8	33.8	74	100.0
	1880-81	31.3	0.0	35.4	33.3	144	100.0
	1890-91	44.7	0.0	10.6	44.7	47	100.0
	1900-01	51.9	0.0	4.9	43.2	81	100.0
	1910-11	57.1	0.0	11.9	31.0	42	100.0
Belfast	1864-65	29.6	21.0	20.9	28.5	649	100.0
	1877-78	40.0	5.7	18.5	35.8	964	100.0
	1890-91	59.1	0.0	11.4	29.5	2,463	100.0
	1900-01	50.0	10.3	17.0	22.7	2,018	100.0
	1910-11	74.9	0.0	11.3	13.8	1,239	100.0
North Dublin	1860-61	47.8	0.0	27.3	24.9	437	100.0
	1870-71	54.0	0.2	20.9	24.9	465	100.0
	1880-81	63.4	0.1	21.9	14.6	1,048	100.0
	1890-91	67.6	0.0	17.2	15.2	296	100.0
	1900-01	82.4	0.0	12.6	5.1	2,434	100.0
	1910-11	79.5	1.0	4.8	14.7	395	100.0
Thurles	1870-01	45.1	1.2	25.7	28.0	82	100.0
	1879-80	52.1	0.0	33.5	14.4	146	100.0
	1889	66.7	1.8	17.8	13.7	219	100.0
	1900-01	82.4	0.0	9.0	8.6	278	100.0
	1910-11	82.5	0.0	4.9	12.6	103	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

of married mothers also increased at the Belfast workhouse from 29.6 per cent in 1864-65 to 74.9 per cent in 1910-11, from 47.8 per cent in 1860-61 to 79.5 per cent in 1910-11 at North Dublin, and from 45.1 per cent in 1870-71 to 82.5 per cent in 1910-11 at Thurles. Trends in the percentage of children admitted with an unmarried mother varied between the four workhouses. At Ballymoney, these children represented a large percentage of children with only their mother in each register. This proportion increased from 26.4 per cent in 1850-51 to 44.7 per cent in 1890-91 before declining during the twentieth century. At Belfast, this percentage increased from 28.5 per cent in 1864-65 to 35.8 per cent in 1877-78 and subsequently declined to 13.8 per cent in 1910-11. Similarly, at North Dublin, children of unmarried mothers declined from 24.9 per cent in 1860-61 to 14.7 per cent in 1910-11, while at Thurles they declined from 28.0 per cent in 1870-71 to 12.6 per cent in 1910-11. These figures show that, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were higher percentages of illegitimate children admitted to Ulster workhouses than elsewhere in Ireland.

The percentage of children who were admitted with widowed mothers decreased at all four workhouses. At Thurles, children of widowed mothers decreased from 25.7 per cent in 1870-71 to 4.9 per cent in 1910-11, with a peak of 33.5 per cent in 1879-80 coinciding with a period of subsistence crisis. A similar decline occurred at North Dublin (27.3 per cent in 1860-61 to 4.8 per cent in 1910-11). A sharp decrease occurred at Ballymoney during the 1880s which reduced this percentage from 35.4 per cent in 1880-81 to 10.6 per cent in 1890-91. The percentage of children of widowed mothers declined to a lesser extent at Belfast, from 20.9 per cent in 1864-65 to 11.3 per cent in 1910-11. The timing of this decline at each workhouse was linked with the relaxing of attitudes by individual Boards of Guardians towards the provision of outdoor relief for widows. Furthermore, the opposition of the Belfast Board of Guardians to the provision of outdoor relief may have been due to the availability of

female employment in the city and an expectation among relief providers that widows had the capacity to support their children.⁵¹

The extent to which married women were considered deserted by their husbands is unclear from the registers as officials were inconsistent in the explicit recording of a woman as 'deserted'. Children of deserted mothers were recorded to a significant extent only in 1850-51 and 1860-61 at Ballymoney, and in Belfast in 1864-65, 1877-78, and 1900-01. The haphazard recording or, in the cases of North Dublin and Thurles, near absence of deserted women suggests that either officials often deemed it superfluous to record married women as deserted, or that desertion was recorded only when a woman explicitly described herself as deserted upon her admission into a workhouse. The minute books of Boards of Guardians detail numerous cases of married women providing information against their husbands in order for the Board of Guardians to begin proceedings against them for desertion. For example, in March 1852, Bridget Gear, 'whose husband resides in Liverpool but refuses to give her any support', was admitted into the North Dublin workhouse and asked the Guardians to prosecute him.⁵² Gear's husband was 'arrested and brought over from Liverpool, ... attended trial with 2 witnesses of his marriage' and was 'pressed for the fullest penalty' of imprisonment with hard labour for three months 'as the prisoner was living with another woman'.⁵³ Similarly, in 1891, the Belfast Board of Guardians provided a solicitor 'to assist Mrs Rutherford ... in taking proceedings against her husband for leaving her and her family without support, she having been obliged to apply for admission to the workhouse'.⁵⁴ In some cases, however, women

⁵¹ Crossman, 'Middle-class attitudes', pp 141-4; Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican women in Dublin: philanthropy, politics and education in the early twentieth century* (Dublin, 2005), pp 108-9, 182-3, 191.

⁵² North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1852. NAI, BG/78/A/18.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1891. PRONI, BG/7/A/55.

appear to have been resident within the workhouse for several months before providing information against their husbands.⁵⁵

Some married women may not have considered themselves and their children as having been abandoned by their husbands, however. Under the 1847 Vagrant Act, ‘any person deserting or wilfully neglecting to maintain his wife and child ... so that such wife or child becomes chargeable to the Union’ was liable for prosecution and imprisonment for desertion.⁵⁶ From the perspective of poor families, what poor relief authorities termed desertion or wilful neglect to maintain may have been an agreed survival strategy whereby some members of the family entered the workhouse for a short period while others sought work elsewhere. In 1852, *The Nation* observed that such practice was commonplace in Irish workhouses: ‘[t]here were many ... “deserted women;” the “desertion” being that their husbands had gone to England for summer work, leaving their families to the Union.’⁵⁷ These ‘deserted’ women often refused to provide information for the prosecution of their husbands for abandonment, much to the frustration of Boards of Guardians. In 1862, the Tralee Board of Guardians’ resolved to prosecute the husbands of married women in the workhouse, but the clerk reported that the women ‘did not state that the husbands had deserted them – the chief point to constitute the offence.’ The Board stated that if the women had not said that their husbands had deserted them, ‘they would not have admitted the women – much less ordered the prosecution’, and that given such women had been granted admission, ‘the relieving officers of this Union do not do their duty.’⁵⁸ As with cases of abandoned children, Boards of Guardians attempted to deter poor families from using the workhouse in this manner. The Belfast Board ordered that a list of all married women in the workhouse ‘be prepared, printed and posted offering a reward not exceeding £1 for information and conviction’ of a husband, while several Boards discharged women

⁵⁵ For examples, see: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/67; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1901. NAI, BG/78/A/115.

⁵⁶ *First annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 61.

⁵⁷ *The Nation*, 2 Oct. 1852.

⁵⁸ *Tralee Chronicle and Killarney Echo*, 6 Jun. 1862.

who did not seek to prosecute their husbands.⁵⁹ Some married women were allowed to temporarily leave the workhouse in order to search for their husbands and warn them to remove their family lest they face prosecution.⁶⁰

Boards of Guardians were restricted in the measures they could take against married mothers as relief was provided solely upon the basis of destitution. In 1910, the Athlone Board attempted to police the admission of married women who sought relief without their husbands and whose ‘excuse invariably was that the husband was out looking for work’, through a rule that required husbands to enter with their wives before being allowed out to look for work at the Board’s discretion.⁶¹ Without such a rule, argued the Chairman, ‘the husbands were now drinking the money they got for the work, and their wives and families were thrown on the ratepayers.’⁶² However, the Relieving Officer stated that this rule was unworkable since the Board ‘could not refuse admission to anyone destitute no matter what the circumstances.’⁶³ Several Boards tacitly accepted this use of their workhouses by married mothers while simultaneously maintaining the principle of desertion. In 1882, the North Dublin Board resolved that, ‘each woman seeking admission to this house with children whose husband is alive be required to sign the usual declaration that she does not know where her husband is.’⁶⁴ The use of the workhouse in this manner by some married couples is an example of how some of the ways in which poor families made use of indoor relief in their survival strategies conflicted with the attempts by the poor relief authorities to control how the workhouse was accessed.

⁵⁹ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1861. PRONI, BG/A/23. For examples of the forced departure of married women, see: Newry Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1846. PRONI, BG/2/A/4; Castlederg Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1848. PRONI, BG/8/A/2; Clifden Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1874. GCCA, GPL3/46; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1897. NAI, BG/78/A/76.

⁶⁰ See for example: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1850. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1870. NAI, BG/78/A/54; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1910. NAI, BG/78/A/130.

⁶¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Sep. 1910.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1882. NAI, BG/78/A/78.

The workhouse registers and the minute books of Boards of Guardians also give an indication of the range of reasons for which unmarried mothers accessed and utilised poor relief. The admission of unmarried mothers into the workhouses and their experiences in these institutions have been a focus of historians of poor relief in Ireland. Scholarly studies have shown that the workhouse often represented a form of refuge for such women during childbirth or unemployment as they had been shunned by their families and wider society due to the stigma of unmarried motherhood.⁶⁵ Unmarried mothers found it difficult or impossible to remain in their employments, especially if they were domestic servants.⁶⁶ Historians have also argued that the workhouse was a more flexible and anonymous alternative source of relief for unmarried mothers in contrast to the reformatory and moralistic ethos of institutions run by religious orders.⁶⁷ Contemporary commentators and religious authorities alleged that the availability of non-reformatory relief in the workhouses facilitated and encouraged female immorality and an increase in the numbers of illegitimate children.⁶⁸ Such concerns were most pronounced during the late 1850s and early 1860s when, as shown in Chapter One, an increasing percentage of children in the workhouses were illegitimate.⁶⁹ In 1861, two Catholic clergymen wrote to Archbishop Paul Cullen their view that the ‘shelter of the Poorhouse is no doubt a great encouragement of this class as they are enabled by the law to go in and out as they please’, and that ‘a reformatory and more stringent rules than those of the poor law are ... the only recipe’ for the reform of such women who exploited a ‘system which

⁶⁵ Luddy, *Prostitution*, pp 38, 53-60; Luddy, ‘Unmarried mothers’, pp 110-12; McLoughlin, ‘Workhouses and Irish female paupers’, p. 122; Purdue, ‘Surviving the industrial city’, pp 20-1.

⁶⁶ Samantha K. Williams, ‘“I was forced to leave my place to hide my shame”: the living arrangements of unmarried mothers in London in the early nineteenth century’ in Joanne McEwan and Pamela Sharpe (eds), *Accommodating poverty: the housing and living arrangements of the English poor, c. 1600-1850* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp 194-5.

⁶⁷ Luddy, *Prostitution*, pp 38, 53-5; Luddy, ‘Unmarried mothers’, pp 112-26; Purdue, ‘Surviving the industrial city’, pp 6-10.

⁶⁸ Luddy, *Prostitution*, p. 55.

⁶⁹ See: Chapter One, p. 49.

proceeds on the principle of relieving distress without reference to its cause.’⁷⁰ However, Crossman has argued that depictions of how unmarried mothers accessed the workhouse as an exploitation of the poor relief system, ‘misunderstand both the reality of these women’s lives and the operation of the relief system’ and that while unmarried mothers ‘were not passive victims of circumstance’, they were still ‘the victims of poverty’ who ‘were not exploiting the system, they were simply making use of it.’⁷¹

A lack of financial support from the fathers of illegitimate children was a major cause for the admission of unmarried mothers into a workhouse. Under the Irish Poor Law, unmarried mothers were deemed responsible for the maintenance of their illegitimate children and they were restricted in their ability to enforce paternal responsibility.⁷² However, Boards of Guardians did attempt to recover the costs of the maintenance of illegitimate children from putative fathers. The Thurles Board argued that unmarried mothers were the victims of ‘Libertines, to whose immoral conduct those poor creatures owe their degradation and consequent destitution.’⁷³ As the percentages of illegitimate children in the workhouses rose during the 1850s, Boards of Guardians became increasingly concerned with the enforcement of paternal responsibility on the fathers of illegitimate children. The names of putative fathers were occasionally published, perhaps to elicit public pressure onto such fathers to support their children. For example, in October 1859, the Clifden Board of Guardians resolved that ‘women having bastard children in the House be questioned as to who is the father ... and that the names of said fathers be placed up on a conspicuous part of

⁷⁰ Galvin to Cullen, 12 Mar. 1861, Cullen Papers, Dublin Diocesan Archives, 1861/340/1. File I/Secular Clergy 1861 and Greene to Cullen, 12 Mar. 1861, Cullen Papers, Dublin Diocesan Archives, 1861/340/1, File I/Secular Clergy 1861 as quoted in Luddy, ‘Unmarried mothers’, p. 111.

⁷¹ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 196.

⁷² Ibid, pp 182-3; For discussions on the ability for unmarried mothers to obtain maintenance from putative fathers under the New Poor Law in England, see: Pat Thane, ‘Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England’, *History Workshop*, 6 (1978), pp 36-8; Nutt, ‘Illegitimacy’, pp 335-61; Williams, ‘Unmarried mothers and the New Poor Law in Hertfordshire’, pp 27-43.

⁷³ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/32.

the Board Room over the fire place in large class writing and be kept always there for general information.’⁷⁴

Unmarried mothers in Ireland were unable to undertake legal proceedings in their own names against putative fathers and therefore may have entered the workhouses to gain the assistance of Boards of Guardians in the recuperation of the costs of a child’s maintenance from the father. Between 1859 and 1861, a parliamentary select committee considering reform of the Irish Poor Law received numerous petitions from Boards of Guardians who advocated for a law ‘that would enable them to get at the male parents of the children, and compel them to support their offspring, and relieve the honest though struggling ratepayer of the costs he was at present under in the support of these people’.⁷⁵ The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1862 empowered Boards of Guardians to recover from putative fathers the maintenance costs of illegitimate children, and the Illegitimate Children Act of 1863 allowed costs to be recovered via a civil bill process. However, as Crossman points out, the difficulty of successfully corroborating in court an unmarried mother’s statement on identity of the father meant that some Boards of Guardians ‘regarded this process as more trouble than it was worth.’⁷⁶ Boards of Guardians were opposed to allowing unmarried mothers themselves to prosecute a putative father for maintenance. The Ballina Board considered ‘such a power against the man as ... being easily abused’ for it ‘promoted immorality in her case, by the opportunity of getting at the men, and recovering money from them’ through false claims.⁷⁷ By the early twentieth century this legal bar against unmarried mothers was widely deemed ‘singularly inequitable’, and the report by the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland argued

⁷⁴ Clifden Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1859. GCCA, GPL3/24.

⁷⁵ *Connaught Telegraph*, 12 Dec. 1860. See also: Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1859. PRONI, BG/1/A/8.

⁷⁶ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 183. For an example of the difficulties faced by Boards of Guardians in the successful prosecution of a putative father, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/56.

⁷⁷ *Connaught Telegraph*, 12 Dec. 1860. See also: *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 211.

for the assimilation of the law in Ireland to that in England and Wales where women could initiate legal proceedings.⁷⁸

The recording of women's marital status in the workhouse registers was not wholly accurate. Several workhouse officials claimed that some women gave false information about their marital status to either avoid questions about their family circumstances or to influence how they were treated in the workhouse. In 1861, the North Dublin Master stated before a parliamentary committee that married women frequently claimed that they were single in order to avoid giving information about their husbands: 'if she says she is married, she is asked where her husband is ... and the relieving officer or the guardians may explain, that if he has deserted the woman, she must make a declaration before a magistrate' but 'if she comes in and says she is a widow, with a baby, the relieving officer may ask where her husband died ... or ... where she was married' and 'if she could not produce the marriage certificate, of course that statement would not do.'⁷⁹ Also in 1861, George Place, a South Dublin Guardian claimed that some women changed their marital status each time they were admitted. By way of example, he claimed that Sarah Clooney had been admitted as a widow on 23rd November 1857 and discharged on 24th April 1858, but when she had been readmitted on 26th April 1858 with an infant child, she had stated that she was single because 'she thought she would be better treated as a single woman.' Upon her two returns to the workhouse, Sarah Clooney was recorded as married and again as a widow.⁸⁰ From this example, Place contended that, 'you see by referring to the registers that you cannot always come at the truth with respect to a woman's character when she appears under so many capacities.'⁸¹ Women provided or withheld information about their family circumstances depending upon how they sought to utilise poor relief in their survival strategies and upon how they thought they would be

⁷⁸ Anon., 'Belfast', *British Medical Journal*, 2133 (1901), pp 1501-2; *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland*, p. 44.

⁷⁹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 238.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, pp 202-3.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 203.

perceived by poor relief officials. Hence, the statistics detailed in Table 4 may not be a wholly accurate statistical representation of the marital statuses of all mothers in the workhouses.

Finally, regarding the small percentages of children who were admitted with both of their parents, many were recorded in the rural workhouses as migrants whose parents were travelling in search of work. In the Ballymoney registers, both-parent families were frequently recorded as ‘journeying’ or ‘travelling’ to the urban centres of Belfast, Coleraine, and Londonderry, or further afield to Cork or Scotland. The recording of such families as migrants is evidence of the greater mobility of the labouring classes from the late-1850s as the decline in agricultural employment compelled families to move towards urban centres where women and children had more opportunity to contribute to the family income.⁸² In 1858, the Poor Law Commissioners, who labelled such families as tramps and vagrants, argued that ‘it is the facility of obtaining lodging by night that encourages begging by day, and enables persons to travel from one part of the country to another without legitimate means of support’ with ‘the Workhouse of each Union through which they pass being used as a station.’⁸³ Officials experienced difficulties in policing this practice as migrant families appeared at workhouses in a destitute state. In 1859, the Antrim Guardians complained to the Poor Law Commissioners that since their workhouse was ‘on the main trunk road from Belfast to the northern counties’, it was almost impossible for them ‘to discriminate between the really destitute (whom they are always prepared to relieve) and vagrant tramps whom they are equally anxious to prevent becoming a charge upon the Union.’⁸⁴ For families who had travelled long distances on foot and

⁸² Fitzpatrick, ‘The disappearance of the Irish agricultural labourer’, pp 73-6; David Feldman, ‘Migration’ in Martin J. Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge urban history of Britain, Vol. III: 1840-1950* (Cambridge, 2000), pp 189-92. For a discussion of the increased mobility of poor families in Ulster, see, Purdue, ‘Poverty and power’, p. 78.

⁸³ *Eleventh annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 13-15. See also, Poor Law Commission Office, Dublin 23 February 1871 to T. H. Burke, Esq. Dublin Castle, NO. 3845, NAI, CSORP/1872/12111, box no. 3.632.2.

⁸⁴ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1859. PRONI, BG/1/A/8.

arrived in an unfamiliar place with little or no money or food, the workhouse was likely the only accommodation available to them.

Children admitted with both parents into urban workhouses tended to have a sick or injured head of household whose loss of income had tipped the family into destitution. For example, in January 1878, a family of four children and their mother were admitted into the Belfast workhouse as their father, a fireman sick with fever, was sent to the workhouse hospital where he later died. The children then spent four months in the workhouse during which time their mother was permitted to seek employment outside.⁸⁵ The opposition of the Belfast Guardians to outdoor relief meant that such families were provided little opportunity to adjust their economy of makeshifts to compensate for the loss of income. The low numbers of children admitted with both parents contrasts with the emphasis placed by authorities upon the whole family principle which held that ‘it is rendered imperative’ for a whole family enter a workhouse on the basis that ‘it would be dangerous to hold out the principle, that a man was not responsible for all his family’.⁸⁶ Families with both parents may have had a greater capacity to avoid destitution and therefore remain outside the workhouse, but the analysis of children admitted with a single parent has shown that many children with a married mother also had a father who was working outside. The disparities between the composition of a family when outside of the workhouse and their form upon admission are reminders that applications for relief represented instances during, and not necessarily the endpoints of, ongoing survival strategies.

IV: Length of stay and repeat admissions

The length of time a family spent in a workhouse, and whether they were admitted only once or on multiple occasions, can give further details on the role of the workhouse in their economy of makeshifts. A child’s length of stay in a workhouse is

⁸⁵ Belfast Board of Guardians Indoor Register, Nov. 1877 – Mar. 1878. PRONI, BG/7/G/2.

⁸⁶ *Belfast News Letter*, 20 Nov. 1838.

calculated by the number of days between the date of admission and the date of either discharge or death. The lengths of stay of children and families were calculated from each register that was examined as part of this project. The most notable trend observed in this analysis was a reduction in the length of stay of children in the workhouses during the post-Famine era. Whereas stays of over one month were common in the early registers, most children resided in the workhouses for under a week and many for only one or two days by the late nineteenth century. The registers therefore indicate that the popular understanding of children having remained within a workhouse for years was not an accurate depiction of how children experienced the workhouse institution during the post-Famine era.

Table 5 is an example of this methodology as applied to the 1900-01 registers for the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses. Overall, children tended to remain for longer periods of time in Belfast and North Dublin in comparison to Ballymoney and Thurles. Whereas 62.6 per cent and 70.2 per cent of children remained in the Ballymoney and Thurles workhouses respectively for only one or two days, only 9.6 per cent of children in Belfast and 19.1 per cent of children in North Dublin remained for just the same length of time. This difference between the urban and rural workhouses was likely due to a range of factors including the use of the rural workhouses as stopover accommodations by migrant families, the more diverse causes of urban destitution, the more extensive use of the Belfast workhouse as a hospital, and, from a methodological perspective, due to the greater sample size of families provided in the registers of urban workhouses.

There were variations in the lengths of stay of children of different family forms. Children without parents tended to remain for the longest periods of time. Compared to unaccompanied children in total, a greater percentage of orphans and abandoned children remained for longer periods of time. For example, at Belfast, 33.3 per cent of orphans and 57.1 per cent of abandoned children stayed in the workhouse for over six months. By 1900-01, the availability of a suitable foster homes was a key

Table 5: Children's length of stay in the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses, 1900-01

Length of stay	Ballymoney					Belfast				
	No parents %	Both parents %	Father only %	Mother only %	All children %	No parents %	Both parents %	Father only %	Mother only %	All children %
1-2 days	24.1	100.0	100.0	53.1	62.6	5.0	23.4	6.8	11.7	9.6
3-7 days	6.9	0.0	0.0	2.5	2.3	6.2	22.6	2.3	15.3	11.9
1-2 weeks	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.3	9.5	11.4	12.4	14.5
2-4 weeks	13.8	0.0	0.0	12.3	9.2	20.3	14.6	22.7	19.5	18.6
1-6 months	10.3	0.0	0.0	27.1	15.5	41.5	27.0	43.2	27.6	30.3
6-12 months	10.4	0.0	0.0	2.5	3.5	4.6	1.5	9.1	4.4	4.1
>12 months	34.5	0.0	0.0	2.5	6.9	5.7	0.7	0.0	2.9	3.4
Died	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.3	0.7	4.5	6.0	7.6
No date	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0
Total	n 29 100.0	58 100.0	1 100.0	81 100.0	169 100.0	988 100.0	245 100.0	80 100.0	2,024 100.0	3,337 100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions, 1900-01

Table 5 (cont.): Children's length of stay in the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses, 1900-01

Length of stay	North Dublin					Thurles				
	No parents %	Both parents %	Father only %	Mother only %	All children %	No parents %	Both parents %	Father only %	Mother only %	All children %
1-2 days	12.9	79.3	53.8	26.1	19.1	4.5	90.3	100.0	72.9	70.2
3-7 days	10.9	9.3	7.7	14.9	12.3	13.6	0.9	0.0	2.9	3.3
1-2 weeks	10.0	4.7	0.0	12.4	11.9	11.4	0.9	0.0	6.4	5.5
2-4 weeks	15.5	2.1	0.0	15.7	15.3	11.4	0.0	0.0	2.9	3.1
1-6 months	28.9	4.7	15.4	17.0	22.5	50.0	6.2	0.0	10.0	12.7
6-12 months	3.9	0.0	0.0	2.5	4.0	2.3	1.8	0.0	1.8	1.8
>12 months	6.6	0.0	15.4	4.6	5.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.2
Died	7.5	0.0	7.7	6.3	7.0	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.9
No date	3.8	0.0	0.0	0.5	2.4	2.3	0.0	0.0	2.3	2.3
Total	n 571	394	30	2,434	3,429	44	114	11	280	449
	% 100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and
Thurles Poor Law Unions, 1900-01

determinant in the length of time spent by an orphaned or abandoned child in the Belfast workhouse, and most orphans were boarded out within a month.⁸⁷

There was considerable difference between lengths of stay of children with both parents between the Belfast and the other three workhouses. All children with both parents at the Ballymoney workhouse stayed for only one or two days, as did 90.3 per cent at Thurles, which reflected their families' use of the workhouse as temporary accommodation when travelling. The longer length of stay at Belfast may have reflected its use as a hospital, as well as the admission of evicted families and those with an unemployed head of household. Little information was recorded in the North Dublin registers to explain the short length of stay of children with both parents. A comparable pattern is evident for children admitted with only their father with that of children with both parents. Children admitted with their mothers tended to remain for longer in urban rather than rural workhouses. At Ballymoney and Thurles respectively, 53.1 per cent and 72.9 per cent of children with only their mothers remained for one or two days, whereas only 11.7 per cent at Belfast and 26.1 per cent at North Dublin did likewise. In all four workhouses, however, few children with only their mother remained for more than six months. The length of stay of children with only their mother varied with their mothers' marital status. For example, at the North Dublin workhouse, only 19.3 per cent of children with unmarried mothers remained for one week or less compared to 44.3 per cent and 50.0 per cent of children with married and widowed mothers respectively.

Several scholarly studies have shown that many individuals, particularly women, were admitted into the workhouses on multiple occasions.⁸⁸ The number of casual admissions into workhouses, often described by officials as 'ins-and-outs' or as 'night lodgers', whereby persons were frequently and repeatedly admitted for only a single night, greatly increased from the late nineteenth century onwards. The number of casual admissions nationally increased from 16,559 in 1870-71 to 268,749 in 1910-

⁸⁷ See: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1901 – Jun. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/67.

⁸⁸ Purdue, 'Surviving the industrial city', pp 11-16; Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 224-5.

11, of which children accounted for 16.3 per cent and 8.7 per cent respectively.⁸⁹ An official statistical return on the number of repeat admissions from 1908 stated that 83.3 per cent of persons in receipt of indoor relief had been admitted only once.⁹⁰ However, the omission of casual admissions from this return means that the numbers of repeat admissions was likely underestimated to a significant extent.

The repeat admission of children and their families into a workhouse is problematic for the statistical analysis of children's family forms as the composition of a family may have been different upon each admission. The repeated admission into the Belfast workhouse in 1878 by the Slavin family, which included a married mother and father, and four children (Sarah aged 14 years, Sophia aged 8 years, Susan aged 3 years, and Anne aged 11 months), is an example of how the composition of a family could vary upon each admission.⁹¹ On 29th January 1878, Sophia, Susan and Anne were admitted with only their mother. They were subsequently joined by Sarah who was admitted alone on 3rd February. All five were discharged together from the workhouse on 6th February. The entire family, including the father, was then readmitted as a single unit on 26th February. Sarah was discharged alone on 2nd March, returned to the workhouse the next day, and then left for an employment situation on 14th March. Anne was taken out by her mother on 9th March, only for both of them to be readmitted later that same day. Anne was again taken out by her mother on 30th March, and Sophia and Susan were taken out by their father on 3rd April. No further admissions of the family were recorded in the 1877-78 register. Even though this family appears to have functioned as a single unit with two parents, in the statistical analysis of children's family forms presented earlier in this chapter, the children of the

⁸⁹ *Twenty-fourth annual report of the Local Government for Ireland*, [C 8153], H.C. 1896, xxxviii, 1, p. 14; *Fortieth annual report of the Local Government for Ireland*, [Cd 6339], H.C. 1912-13, xxxvii, 1, pp 224-5.

⁹⁰ *Return showing the number of men, women, and children (excluding tramp night lodgers) who were in receipt of relief at any time during the year ended 31st March 1908*, [Cd 306], H.C. 1908, xcii, 773.

⁹¹ Belfast Indoor register, Nov. 1877 – Mar. 1878. PRONI, BG/7/G/2.

Slavin family were thus variously recorded upon each admission as having been with only their mother, with only their father, with both parents, or without either parent.

The changing compositions of the Slavin family exemplified the fluid reconfiguration of destitute families who, in times of distress, sent some children into a workhouse in the company of one parent to free up resources or to enable the other parent to seek work.⁹² The family forms in which many children were admitted into a workhouse were therefore not necessarily representative of the compositions of their families when not in receipt of poor relief. The large numbers of children admitted with only a single parent should not be interpreted as evidence for the prevalence of broken family units in post-Famine Ireland. Instead, the changing composition of families upon each admission must be viewed in the context of the economy of makeshifts in which ‘family dissolution was a survival strategy.’⁹³ Moreover, some families may have changed their composition to present themselves in forms which they presumed would appear as more deserving of relief.⁹⁴

V: Women and children at the gate

The workhouse was a contested welfare resource and some families had their access to relief restricted by regulations imposed by workhouse officers who sought to police and control when and how families could seek admission into the workhouse institution. There were differing interpretations concerning entitlement to relief between the Poor Law authorities and the poor, as well as among the wider public.⁹⁵ However, local workhouse officers frequently exercised considerable power over whether and how the poor could access relief.

⁹² Levene, *Childhood of the poor*, p. 22; Martin Daunt, *Wealth and welfare: an economic and social history of Britain, 1851-1951* (Oxford, 2007), p. 526.

⁹³ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, p. 132.

⁹⁴ Purdue, “A gigantic system of casual pauperism”, pp 42-3, 56-7.

⁹⁵ For a discussion about entitlement, see: Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 114-21; Purdue, “A gigantic system of casual pauperism”, pp 42-3, 56-7.

This was most notably manifested at the gates of urban workhouses at which applicants were denied admission if they arrived late at night. Children brought by parents to the workhouse after the gates had shut usually had to wait outside and sleep on the road until morning. In 1878, a police inspector observed that families who had been refused admission into the Cork workhouse because they arrived after 10pm were frustrated by their treatment:

They often complain of this, and of having received harsh treatment from the gate porter, and naturally feel annoyed at not being admitted. On more than one occasion the constabulary have lately found poor women with their children asleep on the road near the gate, at eleven o'clock, pm, and have themselves knocked to see if they could be admitted. On one of these occasions a gentleman who lives convenient came to the constable, and told him that "if he continued knocking until morning he would not receive a reply."⁹⁶

Poor relief authorities were generally unsympathetic to such families, however. When the South Dublin Board of Guardians received complaints from the police and public that 'it was not right ... that these poor people should be obliged to wait outside', the Board resolved that the gates would remain locked at night as the poor 'had the whole day to make application if they wanted to get into the house.'⁹⁷ Workhouse officials reasoned that the availability of relief late at night would facilitate the use of the workhouse as temporary lodgings for casuals and prostitutes.

Workhouse officers were hostile to the admission of unmarried women with children late at night because such women were assumed to have been prostitutes. The master and porters of the Belfast workhouse were particularly suspicious of unmarried mothers and their treatment of these women was frequently criticised by the public. For instance, in August 1871, the Belfast Master reported that he had been obliged to admit six 'prostitutes' with infants who had 'arrived at the workhouse gate from 4 o'clock am up to 9 o'clock' as 'it being wet and from their wretched appearance (from

⁹⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 6 Sep. 1878.

⁹⁷ *Evening Herald*, 21 Sep. 1893.

their night's debauchery) considerable sympathy was manifested for them by the passers [sic] by.'⁹⁸

Public interventions were motivated by the sight of children sleeping outside the gate, but workhouse officers took the view that such children were best protected by discouraging women from seeking admission at night. In July 1871, a police constable noticed Catherine McVeigh, 'a respectable looking girl about 22 years of age, with an infant on the breast' outside the Belfast workhouse gate at 7am on a Sunday. McVeigh told the constable that, 'she had left the workhouse on the previous day to seek for her friends and obtain work' but 'had been there all night' because the porter had refused them admission at 2am.⁹⁹ During the subsequent inquiry, however, the Porter stated that McVeigh had, 'only left the workhouse in the evening' as 'she only wanted to "see her boy" and did not allege she was going to service or to find her friends either of which would be a most unlikely errand at that time of the evening.'¹⁰⁰ Instead, the porter alleged that at midnight, 'a man crossed the road to the workhouse gate and took McVeigh up the Lisburn Road, certainly for no proper purpose.'¹⁰¹ To the suggestion that his refusal to readmit McVeigh placed her infant child at risk from exposure, the Porter replied:

should McVeigh's child have died during the night, whilst the mother was earning the wages of infamy, I would consider the mother alone responsible as she left the shelter accorded to her and her child avowedly for the purpose of prostitution.¹⁰²

Thus, despite their destitution and need of relief, the children of unmarried mothers who sought admission into a workhouse late at night could have their access to relief restricted by the regulations and moral perceptions of workhouse officers who wanted

⁹⁸ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34

to enforce parental responsibility and police the use of the workhouse in the economy of makeshifts.

VI: Conclusion

Workhouse relief was accessed by poor families to meet a wide range of needs. This chapter has applied a new statistical methodology to the analysis of children and their families as recorded in the admission and discharge registers of four Irish workhouses: Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles. Children were categorised according to whether they were admitted with both parents, with one parent, or without parents, but there were nuances and subcategories within each family form. The percentages of children of each family form were broadly similar at all four workhouses, but there were some distinctions such as both parent families accounting for a greater percentage of children's admissions at the two rural workhouses while a larger proportion of children were admitted unaccompanied into the urban workhouses.

Orphaned and abandoned children were admitted throughout the post-Famine era, but this analysis has shown that most children without parents were admitted for hospital treatment. Children with only their mother were the most common family form. The ways in which this type of family accessed workhouse relief often conflicted with how the Poor Law authorities sought to control how the workhouse was utilised by the poor. This was apparent in the refusal of some married mothers to prosecute their husbands for abandonment. Moreover, some women gave false information about their marital status in order to access poor relief in the manner that they needed and to avoid the scrutiny of workhouse officers. Additionally, families who attempted to gain admission into urban workhouses late at night often found their access to relief restricted or denied by regulations designed to dictate how and when families should access relief.

Family form was a key determinate in the length of time spent by a child in a workhouse. Orphaned and abandoned children tended to remain longest, but there was

an overall shortening of time spent by children in the workhouses over the course of the post-Famine era. Yet, while many children resided for only several days, the prevalence of repeat admissions meant that some children may have been in the workhouse multiple times during a short period of time. Some families presented themselves in a different composition upon each admission which is an indication the family forms of many children were not synonymous with the composition of their families while outside of the workhouse. The statistical analysis of children's family forms and circumstances has broadened our understanding of who these children were and the reasons for which they were in a workhouse. This analysis also provides important context for succeeding chapters. The family circumstances of children upon their admission had a significant bearing upon their experiences within the workhouse institutions.

Chapter Four

Pauper education and the workhouse school

I: Introduction

The education of the children of the poor was a subject of extensive political and social debate in post-Famine Ireland. David Fitzpatrick has observed that the introduction of National Education in 1831, and the subsequent provision of a modicum of compulsory education in 1892, meant that, ‘the schoolroom gradually became a familiar place to Irish children’ over the course of the nineteenth century.¹ Most of the children who were in receipt of poor relief also became familiar with the workhouse schoolroom. Education in the workhouse school was a major part of children’s daily lives within the institution and it represented a shared experience for children who had been admitted for different reasons and from different family backgrounds. Children in the workhouse had their routine dictated by the school timetable, and the separation of children from their parents largely limited their social interactions to those with other children and their schoolteachers. The workhouse school curriculum adhered closely to that of the National Education system, but the narrow content of pauper education and the limited resources allocated for its teaching also reflected prevailing social attitudes about the character, prospects, and eligibility of the workhouse child. Pauper education was central to the experiences of workhouse children and to contemporary understandings about a workhouse childhood.

This chapter is an exploration of pauper education in the workhouse schools of post-Famine Ireland. Sourced primarily from the reports by inspectors from both the National Education Commissioners and the Poor Law Commissioners, this examination details the content of the literary education received by children and the standard of literacy attained by them. Subsequently, the standard of teaching through

¹ David Fitzpatrick, “‘A share of the honeycomb’: education, emigration and Irishwomen”, *Continuity and Change*, 1 (1986), p. 218.

which pauper education was delivered is investigated with consideration of the numbers and qualifications of workhouse schoolteachers. This chapter shows that the conditions under which workhouse schoolteachers were tasked to teach had a significant bearing upon their social interactions with the children under their charge and upon the maintenance of discipline within the classroom. The nature of inspector reports, as well as the newspaper reports and contemporary published works considered alongside them, means that this chapter is principally national in scope, but evidence is also drawn from the minute books of several Boards of Guardians to provide a local perspective. Also examined are the viewpoints held by poor relief authorities and social commentators concerning the significance and purpose of pauper education. Education was a major theme in material published by contemporaries about pauper children. Pauper education and the workhouse school will be considered firstly within the wider context of the education of the children of the poor in nineteenth-century Ireland.

II: Educating the children of the poor

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the provision of elementary education in Ireland was haphazard and characterised by religious controversy. Charter Schools for the education of poor Catholic children had been established during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by numerous Protestant voluntary societies such as the Kildare Place Society and the London Hibernian Society with the aid of government grants.² Such societies were criticised by Catholic clergy as proselytising agencies because of their stated mission to educate Catholic children as Protestants, however, and the British government increasingly distanced itself from their activities. Most Catholic children instead attended ‘hedge schools’, usually held

² Patrick J. McCusker, ‘19th century elementary schools in the parish of Beragh’, *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, 12 (1986), pp 165-6; Christopher McCormack, ‘Superior schooling: the legacy of the Endowed Schools Commissions (1791-1894) to Irish education’ in Deirdre Raftery and Karin Fischer (eds), *Educating Ireland: schooling and social change, 1700-2000* (Dublin, 2014), pp 22-41.

in cabins or stables and delivered by itinerant and untrained Catholic schoolteachers who set their own individual curricula.³ The passage of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 intensified support for the provision of a national and non-denominational system of elementary education for the children of the labouring classes.⁴

The introduction of the National Education system in 1831 has been described by Donald Akenson as ‘an educational surprise’ because ‘it appeared seemingly before it should have’ in the context of popular education in nineteenth-century Europe.⁵ National Education was envisaged by its proponents as a non-denominational system of elementary schooling in which Catholic and Protestant children were taught together for secular subjects but separately for religious education. Under the supervision of the National Education Commissioners, considerable power was devolved to local school managers who were responsible for the maintenance and general operation of their schools, although the Commissioners retained responsibility for the hiring of teachers and the payment of salaries as well as the publication of textbooks that were used within national schools.⁶ The establishment only in 1870 of a similar system of education in England has been referenced by several historians as evidence that early nineteenth-century Ireland was a ‘social laboratory’ within the United Kingdom ‘where various policy initiatives were tried out which might be less acceptable to England.’⁷ Alongside the Poor Law, National Education was part of a wider agenda of intervention and reform that sought to improve the economic condition of Ireland and check political agitation through literacy and moral education

³ James H. Murnane, ‘The National School system in County Monaghan: 1831-1850’, *Clogher Record*, 12 (1986), p. 209; Antonia McManus, ‘The Irish hedge school and social change’ in Raftery and Fischer (eds), *Educating Ireland*, pp 1-21.

⁴ Murnane, ‘The National School system’, p. 210.

⁵ Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish education experiment: the national system of education in the nineteenth century* (London, 1970), pp 1, 3.

⁶ Ibid, pp 5, 9-10.

⁷ Ibid., pp 9-10; Kevin Loughheed, ‘National Education and empire: Ireland and the geography of the National Education system’ in David Dickson et al. (eds), *Irish classrooms and British empire: imperial contexts in the origins of modern education* (Dublin, 2012), p. 8; Michael C. Coleman, “‘Eyes big as bowls with fear and wonder’: children’s responses to the Irish National Schools, 1850-1922”, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 98C (1998), p. 177; Patrick F. O’Donovan, *Stanley’s letter: the National School system and inspectors in Ireland 1831-1922* (Galway, 2017).

for the labouring classes.⁸ Vanessa Rutherford argues that the National School system, as a product of the aligned hopes of both the British government and the Roman Catholic hierarchy, ‘was envisaged as a training camp where labouring class children could be rescued from a potential adult life of immorality, idleness, alcoholism, criminality and disease.’⁹

The National Education system improved the rate of literacy among the labouring classes. Whereas only 49 per cent of males aged between 15 and 24 were recorded as able to read or write in the census of 1851, this proportion had increased to 77 per cent by 1881 and 97 per cent by 1911. Among females of the same age there was an even more rapid improvement from 35 per cent in 1851 to 78 per cent in 1881 and to 98 per cent by 1911.¹⁰ National Education remains ‘imperfectly understood’, however, particularly regarding school attendance among the poorest children.¹¹ School attendance statistics show an increase in the number of children attending school through the nineteenth century, but education was not accessible to all the children of the poor. The percentage of males aged between 5 and 9 in attendance was 28 per cent in 1851 and subsequently increased to 59 per cent in 1881 and to 80 per cent in 1911. Similarly, the percentage of females in the same age group who attended school increased from 24 per cent in 1851 to 59 per cent in 1881 and to 79 per cent by 1911.¹² The haphazardness of the school attendance of poor children is masked in census figures, however. In 1857, poor children attended on only half of the 108 days on which National Schools were open each year, and the inconsistent nature of their attendance reportedly resulted in children receiving less than four years’ worth of schooling.¹³ Low and inconsistent attendances were commonplace as many children,

⁸ Gray, *The making of the Irish Poor Law*, pp 28, 51, 95, 121; Vanessa Rutherford, ‘Girls and the formation of modern Ireland’, *Childhood in the Past*, 11 (2018), p. 39.

⁹ Rutherford, ‘Girls and the formation of modern Ireland’, p. 40.

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, “‘A share of the honeycomb’”, p. 219.

¹¹ Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, p. 1; Eoin O’Sullivan, ‘Irish women and elementary education for the poor in early nineteenth-century Ireland’ in Raftery and Fischer (eds), *Educating Ireland*, pp 61-90.

¹² Fitzpatrick, “‘A share of the honeycomb’”, p. 219.

¹³ James W. Kavanagh, *Popular education in Ireland; sketch of its rise, progress, and present prospects* (Dublin, 1857), pp 28-30.

particularly girls, were required to supplement the family income through farm labour, textile out-work, or begging.¹⁴ An inability by parents to pay school fees and the rising demand for labour after the Famine meant that ‘children are kept at home, some to save and some to earn the increased pay’.¹⁵ Evening schools were established in some localities to provide for those children ‘obliged to commence some trade, or provide some means of earning their livelihood at a very early period’.¹⁶ Attendance fees and the role of children in the economy of makeshifts precluded many poor children from attending school until the introduction of compulsory education in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷

The Irish Education Act of 1892 abolished attendance fees for National Schools but, as Mary Daly has outlined, it obliged parents to send their children to school for only 75 days a year, applied only to county boroughs and the limited number of local authorities which adopted the legislation, and further permitted that any child over 11 with a certificate of proficiency in literacy could be excused attendance altogether.¹⁸ This legislation removed the expense of school attendance fees, but it also posed a serious financial difficulty for parents reliant upon their children’s contributions to the family budget.¹⁹ Moreover, the inspection of children at school increased the financial pressure upon poor families as ‘not only were mothers and fathers expected to do without children’s help, they were also expected to present them in a way that most could not afford to do.’²⁰ The poorest families were unable to send their children to school and into public view with the standard of clothing, cleanliness, and general

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, “‘A share of the honeycomb’”, p. 222; Catríona Clear, *Social change and everyday life in Ireland, 1850-1922* (Manchester, 2007), pp 50-1.

¹⁵ Kavanagh, *Popular education in Ireland*, p. 28.

¹⁶ *Freeman’s Journal*, 19 Nov. 1856.

¹⁷ Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, p. 344.

¹⁸ Mary E. Daly, “‘Primary and natural educator’? The role of parents in the education of their children in independent Ireland’, *Éire-Ireland*, 44 (2009), p. 197. Several historians note that whereas Ireland was at the forefront in the introduction of a national school system, it failed to apply the provisions made for compulsory education as set out in Britain from 1870. For discussions on compulsory schooling in Ireland see: Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, pp 344-6; Tony Fahey, ‘State, family and compulsory schooling in Ireland’, *Economic and Social Review*, 23 (1992), pp 375-8.

¹⁹ Clear, *Social change*, pp 50-1.

²⁰ Buckley, “‘Growing up poor’”, p. 12.

health that had come to be expected by educational and public health authorities. Inconsistent attendance therefore persisted into the early twentieth century and many parents were prosecuted for not sending their children to school. The children least able to attend school were generally from the poorest families.²¹

For destitute children admitted into workhouses, provision was made for their education within the workhouse school system. The workhouse school is almost completely absent from the current published historiography on the Irish Poor Law. Robins and O'Mahony have briefly considered the workhouse school in their studies of the workhouses of South Dublin and Cork respectively.²² They concluded that the low qualifications and abilities of teachers in conjunction with the apathy and parsimoniousness of Boards of Guardians meant that the workhouse schools of these unions 'failed to provide any real education' for pauper children.²³ O'Mahony has argued further that, 'in many cases the school system was little more than a child-minding or child-control intervention' and that, 'education, when and if it occurred, was often the product of the pupils' own determination and ability.'²⁴ As these studies were primarily local in perspective and focused upon the operation of these workhouse schools during the late-1840s and early-1850s, there remains a need to consider pauper education and workhouse schooling from a national viewpoint over the course of the post-Famine era.

Also necessary is a consideration of the practical operation of the workhouse school within the context of the ideologies which underpinned pauper education as well as contemporary understandings of what the system was intended to achieve. The ideology of pauper education has been explored by historians of the New Poor Law in England and Wales. Among Poor Law authorities and contemporary social investigators there was a widely held belief that education was an effective means of

²¹ Murnane, 'The National School system', p. 212.

²² Robins, *The lost children*, pp 223-33; O'Mahony, *Cork's Poor Law palace*, pp 98-122.

²³ Robins, *The lost children*, p. 223.

²⁴ O'Mahony, *Cork's Poor Law palace*, p. 113.

breaking the supposed cycle of hereditary pauperism and juvenile delinquency.²⁵ Several scholarly studies have argued that the intended purpose of workhouse schooling to improve the condition and prospects of pauper children through education and moral reform conflicted with the principle of less-eligibility as there was no national school system in operation in England until 1870.²⁶ In a recent study, Jane Humphries has identified ‘tentative evidence’ that pauper education was responsible for ‘the disappearance of the occupational disadvantages of pauper children’ by the late nineteenth century.²⁷ Significantly, however, contemporary belief in the importance of pauper education, held by the central Poor Law authorities and by social reformers, nevertheless contrasted with the limited resources that many Boards of Guardians were either able or willing to direct towards children’s education.²⁸

The conceptualisation of education as a strategy against hereditary pauperism and juvenile delinquency was shared by poor relief authorities and many social reformers in Ireland. Juvenile criminality pre-dated the Great Famine but Ian Miller has argued that after the social upheaval of the disaster, ‘a distinct construct of juvenile delinquency’ emerged in which ‘child criminality came to be viewed practically and metaphorically as an illness requiring treatment’, specifically within an institutional setting.²⁹ Such concerns informed the establishment of reformatories and industrial schools for juvenile miscreants in 1858 and 1868 respectively.³⁰ There were widely held fears in the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine that the large numbers of

²⁵ Janet E. Livingstone, ‘Pauper education in Victorian England: organisation and administration within the New Poor Law, 1834-1880’ (PhD thesis, London Guildhall University, 1993), pp 2-6; Claire M. Rennie, ‘The education of children in London’s foundling hospital, c. 1800-1825’, *Childhood in the Past*, 11 (2018), p. 11. See also, King, ‘The rise of juvenile delinquency in England’, pp 116-66.

²⁶ Francis Duke, ‘Pauper education’ in Derek Fraser (ed.), *The New Poor Law in the nineteenth century* (London, 1976), p. 67; Crowther, *The workhouse system*, pp 201-2; Felix Driver, *Power and pauperism: the workhouse system 1834-1884* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 96; Livingstone, ‘Pauper education’, pp 35-6; Frank Crompton, *Workhouse children: infant and child paupers under the Worcestershire poor law, 1780-1871* (Stroud, 1997), p. 150

²⁷ Humphries, ‘Care and cruelty in the workhouse’, pp 125.

²⁸ Driver, *Power and pauperism*, p. 97; Livingstone, ‘Pauper education’, p. 6; Crompton, *Workhouse children*, pp 153-9, 193-5.

²⁹ Miller, ‘Constructing “moral hospitals”’, pp 110-11.

³⁰ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 11-17, 32-43.

children left orphaned or abandoned in workhouses would devolve into criminality without the intervention of education or training. In 1852 and 1853, many Irish witnesses before parliamentary select committees investigating the extent of juvenile delinquency in the United Kingdom recommended greater provision for the education of pauper children.³¹ Noting the prevalence of illiteracy among prison populations, social reformers argued that ‘even the small amount of education indicated by the terms reading and writing’ would help children ‘to recognize not simply whether actions are morally good or bad, but also to consider whether in their consequences they will be useful or pernicious; ... thus does education work upon crime.’³² From the early-1850s, increased emphasis was given to the improvement of literacy among pauper children as a check against their supposed tendency towards criminality.

Workhouse education was also conceptualised as a means by which to provide pauper children with the schooling that their destitution had otherwise denied them. The Poor Law Commissioners contended that children’s education in the workhouse was ‘upon the whole an improvement upon that which they could be expected to receive otherwise’.³³ Any concerns that such an education would elevate pauper children to a more eligible position than children outside of the workhouse were in large part negated by the existence of National Schools, although such concerns were occasionally espoused by Poor Law Guardians at the behest of petitions from ratepayers.³⁴ To provide children with an education in line with ordinary National Schools, the curriculum and inspectorate of the National Education Commissioners were adopted in most workhouse schools during the early-1850s. The advantages for Boards of Guardians in the adoption of National Education into their schools included

³¹ *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, [515], H.C. 1852, vii, 1, pp 345, 349-50; *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, [674], H.C. 1852-53, xxiii, 567, pp 338-9, 359, 363, 364.

³² James Haughton, ‘Education the surest preventive of crime, and the best safeguard of life, property, and social order’, *Journal of the Dublin Statistical Society*, 1 (1856), pp 324-5; Mark S. O’Shaughnessy, ‘On criminal statistics; especially with reference to population, education, and distress in Ireland’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 4 (1864), p. 102.

³³ *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 347.

³⁴ Gerard O’Brien, ‘Workhouse management in pre-Famine Ireland’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 86C (1986), p. 121.

the free supply of textbooks every three years with additional copies at half-price, regular inspections, and the transfer in large part of decision-making responsibilities over the content of education from individual Boards of Guardians to the National Education Commissioners.³⁵

By 1854, the Boards of Guardians of 142 workhouses had affiliated their schools to the National Education system.³⁶ Of the 21 workhouse schools not connected, 14 were in Ulster where some Boards of Guardians were more reticent in implementing the non-denominational aspect of National Education.³⁷ The South Dublin Board of Guardians, too, were particularly opposed to non-denomination schooling, and their determination to maintain separate schools for Protestant and Catholic children in their workhouse precipitated their withdrawal from the National Education system.³⁸ As Boards of Guardians were the local managers of their workhouse schools, the central Poor Law authorities had no power to compel the adoption of the National Education system in a particular workhouse, although the Poor Law Commissioners did encourage Boards of Guardians to do so.³⁹ The decision by three Boards of Guardians to disassociate their schools from the National Education system in 1855 was criticised by the National Education Commissioners who accused the Guardians of ‘withholding from the children the means of a sound and uniform education’ because of an ‘abstract disapproval of the national system’ in regards to non-denominational teaching.⁴⁰ The number of workhouse schools connected to the National Education system increased from the early-1860s, however, and the children

³⁵ See: Akenson, *The Irish education experiment* pp 127-74, 318-19

³⁶ *Return of the names of the Poor Law Unions of Ireland, distinguishing those that have schools in connexion with the national board from those that have not*, [206], H.C. 1854, lv, 735.

³⁷ The 21 workhouse schools not connected to the National Education system were: Armagh, Ballinasloe, Baltinglass, Carlow, Celbridge, Clogher, Downpatrick, South Dublin, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Gorey, Gortin, Kilkeel, Lisburn, Lowtherstown, Lurgan, Magherafelt, Newry, Newtown Limavady, Parsonstown, Stranorlar.

³⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Jul. 1853.

³⁹ *Select committee of the House of Lords to inquire into the practical working of the system of National Education in Ireland*, [525], H.C. 1854, xv, 1, p. 343.

⁴⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Nov. 1856.

of 150 workhouse schools were receiving the same curriculum as children in ordinary National Schools by 1901.⁴¹

Pauper education was further viewed as a social responsibility towards workhouse children and as an opportunity to inculcate moral reform and economic improvement among the labouring classes more generally. The potential for pauper education to elicit national moral and economic reform was expressed by the National Education Commissioners who considered that the workhouse schools were ‘one great means, under Providence, of gradually re-casting on a healthy basis the social condition of Ireland.’⁴² The view of pauper education as an economic opportunity was particularly prevalent in newspapers in the years immediately following the Great Famine. In 1852, the *Belfast Mercury* predicted:

From the workhouse schools, a large body of young people will be coming forth, very soon, with new ideas, good habits, and qualifications which will make of them a higher order of peasantry than Ireland has ever yet known.⁴³

A belief that the discretion held by Boards of Guardians over workhouse schools was an impediment to the education of pauper children, however, precipitated demands from education officials and social reformers for greater government intervention. In 1857, John Taylor, a former teacher at the North Dublin workhouse, called for an extension of government educational grants to encompass workhouse schools and he stated that ‘should Government not undertake to educate the paupers, at the end of another century, it may be expected that the tone of education will be lower than it is now, and the people more morally degraded’.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *The sixty-seventh report of the commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, [Cd 704], H.C. 1901, xxi, 561, p. 22.

⁴² *Select committee of the House of Lords to inquire into the practical working of the system of National Education in Ireland*, p. 344.

⁴³ *Belfast Mercury*, 16 Oct. 1852.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 153.

In Britain, workhouse children were described in the writings of some social reformers as the ‘children of the state’ on the basis that their dependency upon statutory welfare made them a social responsibility for government and society.⁴⁵ The language of social responsibility and economic opportunity was also present in writings about children in Irish workhouses. Taylor argued that since ‘nearly all the children in workhouses are virtually orphans, ... the Boards of Guardians, but more properly, I think, the State, stand in *loco parentis*’, they were therefore obliged to make ‘immediate and thorough provision’ for the education of the children under their charge.⁴⁶ Such was the perceived importance of pauper education as a preventative against juvenile delinquency and hereditary pauperism, as well as an opportunity to instil moral reform among the labouring classes, one Irish social reformer contended that the education of pauper children ‘lies at the very root of Poor Law success or failure.’⁴⁷

III: The workhouse schoolroom

This section is an investigation into the conditions under which children experienced the workhouse schoolroom. The regulations for workhouse management in Ireland, communicated to all Boards of Guardians in 1844, were rather vague in setting out how children should be education within the workhouse. Article 22 of the workhouse regulations, the only article that related to pauper education, stipulated:

The boys and girls who are inmates of the workhouse shall, for three of the working hours at least each day, be instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the principles of the Christian religion; and such other instruction shall be imparted to them as shall fit them for service, and train them to habits of usefulness, industry, and virtue.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See: Florence Hill, *Children of the state: the training of juvenile paupers* (London, 1868); Menella B. Smedley, ‘Workhouse schools for girls’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 31 (1874), pp 27-8.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 185.

⁴⁷ Charles R. Chichester, *Amalgamation of Unions, and proposed modifications in the poor-law, Ireland. (The workhouse system as applied to the training of youth.)* (Dublin, 1879), p. 36.

⁴⁸ *Orders of the Poor Law Commission to Unions in Ireland*, [577], H.C. 1844, xl.605, 40, pp 3-4.

With such considerable discretion over education afforded to Boards of Guardians, and with variations in the numbers of children in different workhouses, the central Poor Law authorities expected that pauper education would be implemented only with ‘as much uniformity as was compatible with the extreme difference of circumstances prevailing between different Unions in Ireland.’⁴⁹ The day-to-day administration of workhouse schools was characterised more by idiosyncrasy than by uniformity. Some Boards of Guardians viewed their schools principally as the means to keep children occupied in the confines of an institution.⁵⁰ In contrast to the significance placed upon it by the Poor Law Commissioners and social commentators, pauper education ranked relatively low in the priorities of cost-conscious Boards of Guardians. In 1846, the National Education Commissioners reported that, ‘no part of the education of the poor requires of more decided improvement than the instruction of pauper children in the Workhouse Schools.’⁵¹ Their report noted that few schools provided suitable furniture or enough textbooks for children, and it criticized the Poor Law Commissioners for failing to conduct regular inspections.⁵²

The onset of the Great Famine obstructed any attempt at improvement in the workhouse schools, however. In 1847, the National Education Commissioners reported that workhouse schools, ‘already sadly inefficient, now might be said to be *Schools only in name*.’⁵³ The overcrowding and prevalence of contagious disease among workhouse inmates meant that ‘the school business was neglected, and deemed altogether a secondary duty’ because ‘the exertions of the teachers were more required to relieve want ... than to teach.’⁵⁴ At many workhouses, the schoolrooms were repurposed as dormitories or as hospital wards and children were accommodated in

⁴⁹ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ O’Brien, ‘Workhouse management’, p. 121.

⁵¹ *Thirteenth report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, [832], H.C. 1847, xvii, 187, p. 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵³ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 627.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 165. For descriptions of workhouse schools during famine conditions see: Lanigan, ‘Tipperary workhouse children and the Famine’, p. 63; O’Mahony. *Cork’s Poor Law palace*, pp 100-1; Robins, *Lost children*, pp 223-33.

distant auxiliary buildings with little supervision by workhouse officers.⁵⁵ During the Great Famine, the National Education Commissioners conceded that '[i]t would be unreasonable to expect that the Workhouse Schools could be carried on with any great degree of order or efficiency, when the circumstances of the country are considered.'⁵⁶ By 1852, however, the Commissioners resumed their scrutiny and criticism of workhouse schooling.

To accommodate the tens of thousands of children resident within the workhouses during and immediately after the Great Famine, larger dormitories and schoolrooms were constructed at several workhouses in the south and west of the country. The elevation and ground floor plans of these new schoolrooms, constructed as 'school-wing' extensions on either side of the original entrance building, are illustrated in Figures 7 and 8. The floorspace allocated to children in the extension was markedly greater than that which had been provided in the original buildings. The National Education Commissioners praised the relocation of children's accommodation away from the central workhouse building and from the adult inmates as it was believed to have further separated the children from the dangers of moral contamination.⁵⁷ Liz Thomas has argued that the revised spatial and accommodation arrangements in the workhouses that were facilitated by the addition of the new school-wings were a 'physical manifestation' of the increased concerns of poor relief authorities for the moral welfare of children and the protection of their childhood innocence.⁵⁸ Contrasting the new school-wings with the original location of the schoolrooms within the central accommodation block, one National Education inspector described the new buildings as 'admirably suited to their object' and as being

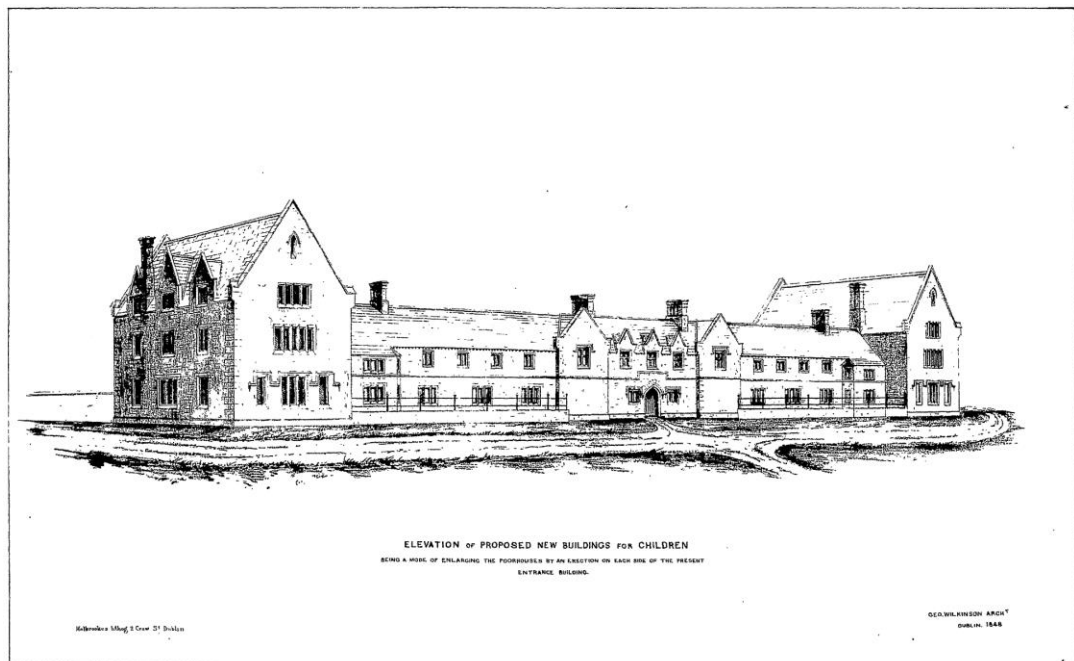
⁵⁵ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 627.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 635.

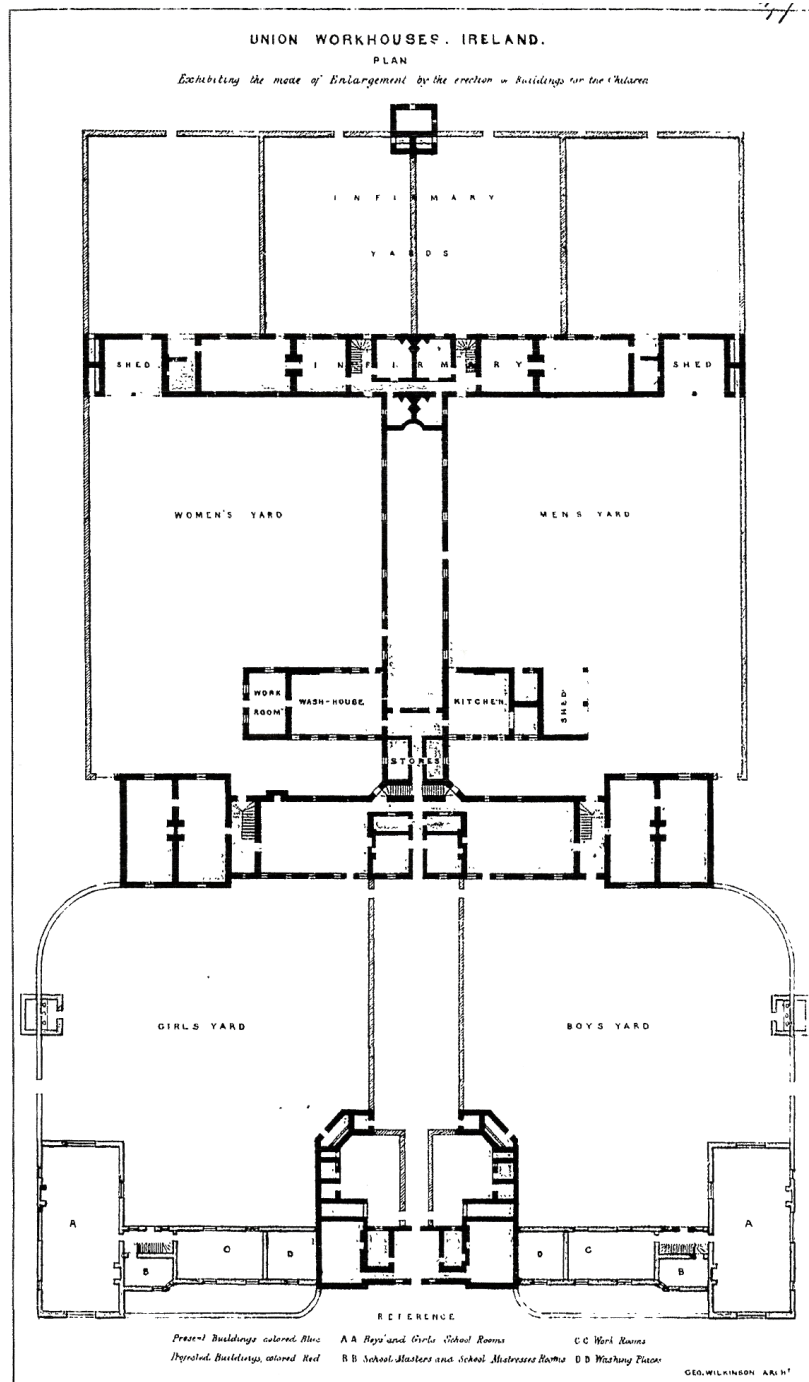
⁵⁸ Liz Thomas, 'The evolving moral and physical geometry of childhood in Ulster workhouses, 1838-55', *Childhood in the Past*, 6 (2013), p. 22.

Figure 7: Architectural elevation of proposed new buildings for children, 1848



Source: *First annual report of the commissioners for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1848],
H.C. 1847-48, xxxiii, 377

Figure 8: Ground floor plan of workhouse with proposed new buildings for children, 1848



*Source: First annual report of the commissioners for the relief of the poor in Ireland, [1847],
H.C. 1847-48, xxxiii, 377*

‘amongst the best school-rooms in Ireland.’⁵⁹ New school-wings were constructed only at those workhouses in which the size of the juvenile population necessitated more accommodation and, crucially, only by those Boards of Guardians which could afford their construction.

A ‘very considerable number’ of southern Boards of Guardians instead accommodated children in wooden sheds erected as emergency accommodation for inmates with contagious disease during the Great Famine. These sheds were usually located at a distance from the main workhouse. The children’s sheds of the North Dublin Poor Law Union were located at Glasnevin and reportedly resembled ‘a curious looking village of wooden huts painted brown, arranged in regular streets and squares’.⁶⁰ Shed accommodation facilitated the removal of children from workhouses and most Boards of Guardians established schools at the sheds so that children would not need to return to the workhouse for education. However, the National Education Commissioners were critical of sheds as ‘wholly unsuitable as schoolrooms’ on the basis that sheds were poorly constructed and unhygienic for the accommodation of large numbers of children.⁶¹ At most workhouses, children continued to receive their education in the original schoolrooms.

National Education inspectors viewed the conditions of most of the original workhouse schoolrooms as ‘decidedly bad’ for children’s education and health.⁶² Whereas the floors of the newly constructed school-wings were of wooden boards and those of Ulster and Leinster workhouses were usually of tiles and soft-brick respectively, the floors of most Munster and Connaught workhouse schoolrooms were in their original earthen state which caused much ‘dust and discomfort’ for the children.⁶³ Bare stone walls and the poor ventilation afforded by latticed windows

⁵⁹ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 628, 635-6.

⁶⁰ *Freeman’s Journal*, 10 Oct. 1871.

⁶¹ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 636.

⁶² *Select committee of the House of Lords to inquire into the practical working of the system of National Education in Ireland*, p. 344.

⁶³ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 635.

made schoolroom air cold and stale.⁶⁴ The proximity of the schoolrooms to workshops, kitchens, and nurseries resulted in frequent interruptions to the business of the school due to ‘the thoroughfare kept up through them’ of inmates and officers passing to different parts of the workhouse.⁶⁵ Schoolroom furniture usually consisted of a blackboard, ‘a few maps hanging from the walls, torn and soiled’, and an insufficient number of chairs and desks for the children in attendance.⁶⁶ One inspector reported that boys in the Antrim workhouse school were ‘miserable looking sitting on loose forms on the cold tiled floor without any support for books or slate’ and consequently ‘can make little progress’.⁶⁷ The ‘few old rickety desks’ in other schoolrooms were described by another inspector as ‘in general, badly constructed, and with no reference to the ages of the children.’⁶⁸ In 1860, boards were attached under the desks of the Ballymena schoolroom as ‘the younger children cannot reach the floor with their feet when they are sitting on the benches.’⁶⁹ Writing materials were also lacking. At the Westport school in 1851, ‘copy books and writing material are unknown to the pupils for a long time and slates have almost entirely disappeared also; ... this want is a complete obstacle to progression.’⁷⁰ Such conditions hampered the education of pauper children but an absence of such complaints in the reports by inspectors during the later nineteenth century may indicate that the conditions and furnishings of workhouse schoolrooms had somewhat improved as inspectors tended to remark only upon conditions that were unsatisfactory.

The length of time spent by pauper children in the schoolroom varied between different workhouses as different timetables were adopted by Boards of Guardians. Timetable variations reflected the different circumstances of each school including the number of children present, the ratio of children to teachers, the ages of children, the

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, pp 213-14.

⁶⁵ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 636.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 214.

⁶⁷ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1859. PRONI, BG/1/A/8.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 213; *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 636.

⁶⁹ Ballymena Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1860. PRONI, BG/4/A/7.

⁷⁰ Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1851. NLI, MS 12614.

spatial limitations of schoolroom accommodation, and the allocation of time for other activities such as industrial training or cleaning. The amount of time required to educate large classes of children in literacy, religious, and industrial subjects, as well as concerns among workhouse officers about the moral dangers of idleness among children, meant that most children spent considerably more time in school than the daily three hours minimum set by the regulations. In 1879, the timetable for boys in the Cork workhouse included eight hours of school or industrial training per day, excluding Sundays:

Boys' daily programme

6.30 to 8.30	Rise, wash, and make up dormitories.
8.30 to 9	Breakfast.
9 to 12.30	Secular and religious instruction.
12.30 to 2	Recreation and out walking.
2 to 2.30	Dinner.
2.30 to 3	School.
3 to 5.30	Agricultural instruction on farm.
5.30 to 6	Supper.
6 to 7.30	School, preparing lessons for next day.
7.30 to 8	Recreation; to bed at 8 o'clock. ⁷¹

The timetable for the girls in the Cork workhouse shows that eight and a half hours were allocated for literacy and industrial education, and that girls were engaged in industrial work and domestic duties around the workhouse for a greater amount of time than boys:

⁷¹ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 2363], H.C. 1878-79, xxx, 1, p. 62.

Girls' daily programme

6.30 to 7	Rise, wash, and make beds.
7 to 7.15	Morning prayers.
7.15 to 8.15	Sweeping, dusting, and scrubbing dormitories.
8.15 to 8.40	Breakfast.
8.40 to 10	Out for exercise, walking in suburbs.
10 to 1.30	Secular and religious instruction.
1.30 to 2	Dinner.
2 to 4	Industrial training, sewing, knitting, darning. On Fridays ironing.
4 to 6	Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, industrial training in laundry – younger children not so engaged get a bath, so that each child has a bath once a week.
6 to 6.30	Supper.
6.30 to 7.30	School, preparing lessons for following day.
7.30 to 8	Cleaning boots and night prayers.
8 o'clock	All go to bed except grown girls who remain up to scrub passages and stairs. ⁷²

The differences between the boys' and girls' school timetables reflected the gendered nature of children's elementary education in workhouse schools and under the National Education system more generally. The National Education textbooks used within workhouse schools emphasized the expected future roles of girls as mothers,

⁷² Ibid., p. 63.

home keepers, and as domestic servants.⁷³ Girls' education centred upon domestic skills and demanded lower standards of literacy and numeracy than for boys.⁷⁴ Education comprised a large proportion of children's daily lives in the workhouse institutions, although the exact proportion varied by locality and by gender.

Some workhouse officers were concerned that the length of time spent by children in school was excessive. In 1851, the Belfast workhouse Medical Officer attributed the deterioration of children's health to their prolonged confinement within the school during the day. The officer advised that children attend school for only four hours per day since he was 'under the impression that the schoolmaster from praiseworthy motives is rather sacrificing health to education.'⁷⁵ Some medical authorities suggested that too much education strained the mental capacities of pauper children. In 1887, a physician of St Joseph's Hospital for Sick Children, Dublin warned Boards of Guardians about the 'premature and excessive mental stimulation ... of the frequently over-educated and generally underfed city pauper children', and he argued that workhouse schooling lacked 'reference to individual receptivity or capacity.'⁷⁶ Such concerns about the correct amount of schooling for pauper children informed the reduction in the number of school hours at several workhouses during the late nineteenth century. Upon reviewing the boys' timetable in 1893, the Belfast Board stated that 'a more elaborate and laborious system was never devised.'⁷⁷ The Guardians resolved that 'there should be a little relaxation' and they introduced a half-day each week to allow for recreation. Commenting upon the effects of the timetable upon children's health and education, the Belfast Chairman stated that 'he was sorry for the boys – and for the teachers' as 'the pressure must be enormous; ... for, after all, the workhouse was not a prison' and he feared that 'in many instances they were

⁷³ See: Rutherford, 'Girls and the formation of modern Ireland', pp 38-55; Lorcan Walsh, 'Images of women in nineteenth-century schoolbooks', *Irish Educational Studies*, 4 (1984), pp 73-87; Jane McDermid, *The schooling of girls in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1900* (London, 2012), pp 41-9.

⁷⁴ Deirdre Raftery and Susan M. Parkes, *Female education in Ireland 1700-1900: Minerva or Madonna* (Dublin, 2007), pp 33-6, 40-50.

⁷⁵ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10.

⁷⁶ *Freeman's Journal*, 6 Aug. 1887.

⁷⁷ *Belfast News Letter*, 19 Jul. 1893.

doing more harm than good.’⁷⁸ Few other Boards of Guardians reduced their school hours, however, possibly due to a lack of alternative ways of keeping children occupied and supervised within a workhouse.

IV: Standards of education

Most workhouse children were educated according to the National Education curriculum. The contents of this curriculum and its textbooks have been explored in detail in several studies of elementary education in Ireland.⁷⁹ Akenson has described the textbooks published by the National Education Commissioners from 1830 to 1860 as ‘probably ... the best set of school books produced in the British Isles’ and which provided a ‘logical, integrated sequence of instruction.’⁸⁰ Beginning with the ‘First Book of Lessons’ and finishing with the ‘Fifth Book of Lessons’, subjects included literacy and numeracy skills, geography, grammar, natural history, biblical history, and moral behaviour. The curriculum was criticised by social commentators as unsuited for the children of the labouring classes as content on agricultural and industrial training was limited. In 1856, the *Daily Express* argued that the curriculum had ‘no direct bearing on the future career of the pupils’ and that children were taught instead ‘to be passive recipients of knowledge, to be quiet, submissive, and obedient’.⁸¹

Pauper education focused upon basic reading and writing skills and few children progressed beyond the first or second books during the 1850s.⁸² Such low levels of attainment were generally considered enough for the employment prospects of pauper children, however. In a report of the Ballymoney workhouse school in 1861, the National Education inspector conceded that ‘the course of instruction is necessarily limited’, but he argued that it was ‘suited to the ages and capacities of the pupils and

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, pp 127-74, 226-7, 235-38; Loughheed, ‘National education and empire’, pp 8-11; Rutheford, ‘Girls and the formation of modern Ireland’, pp 41-2.

⁸⁰ Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, p 229, 231-2.

⁸¹ *Daily Express*, 8 Oct. 1856.

⁸² *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 641.

such as they will require in after life.’⁸³ Basic literacy was deemed essential for children’s future employments as agricultural labourers and domestic servants as it would enable them to understand employment contracts and assist with household management.⁸⁴ An ability to read and write potentially facilitated children’s communications with each other within the workhouse. One Guardian alleged that among girls in the South Dublin Union, ‘the first use they make of their accomplishments is to write love letters to the male paupers.’⁸⁵ Janet Livingstone has suggested that low attainment in literacy among pauper children was caused partly by the use of incomprehensible reading materials which contained words that the children neither used nor heard in their everyday lives.⁸⁶ Inspectors reported that in workhouses in western Ireland especially, the standard of literacy in the schools was low due to children’s unfamiliarity with the English language. In 1854, for instance, an inspector at the Dingle workhouse school noted a ‘prevailing ignorance of *English*, which would here require to be taught as a foreign language by exercise in its vocabulary and copious explanation’, and that the prescriptive format of lessons meant that ‘the boys are set to spell and read English as if they could already *speak* it, and there is no time to communicate its meaning.’⁸⁷ Several inspectors indicated that literacy in the workhouse schools had improved by the early-1860s, an improvement they attributed primarily to the reductions in the number of children in the workhouses which allowed for smaller class sizes.⁸⁸

As standards of literacy improved, older children were increasingly educated in geography and history.⁸⁹ A visitor to the North Dublin workhouse schools in 1871 reported that the children were ‘solving with almost appalling rapidity questions as to

⁸³ Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1861. PRONI, BG/5/A/26.

⁸⁴ Livingstone, ‘Pauper education’, pp 103-4.

⁸⁵ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 215.

⁸⁶ Livingstone, ‘Pauper education’, pp 101-2.

⁸⁷ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 648.

⁸⁸ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 560-7.

⁸⁹ Livingstone, ‘Pauper education’, pp 107-9.

the relationship between King Edward the Confessor and Queen Victoria, the chief towns of Red Russia, and other mysterious problems.’⁹⁰ Some commentators dismissed these subjects as irrelevant for pauper children, however, and claimed that the rote-learning of factual information merely resulted in children ‘remembering little and understanding less’.⁹¹ The absence of Irish history or of references to Ireland as a nation or a country in the National Education curriculum reflected government fears of stimulating nationalism among the labouring classes.⁹² The omission of Irish history was criticised by nationalist Poor Law Guardians. In 1859, the Ballinasloe Board of Guardians wrote to the National Education Commissioners of ‘the necessity of providing their schools with such historical books as may be best calculated to afford to the pupils knowledge of the History of their own [country].’⁹³ In their response, the Commissioners argued that the requirements of non-denominational education obstructed the publication of textbooks on Irish history:

... the Commissioners of National Education have long been anxious to introduce into their series of books a work on History; but they have been unable to find any work extant ... which should serve for the united Education of children of every persuasion and which should contain no matter that could give just cause of offence, either on religious or political grounds to persons of any denomination in Ireland.⁹⁴

Such omissions and a focus upon basic literacy skills meant that the curriculum in workhouse schools was narrow in scope and remained focused upon preparing children for their future roles as agricultural labourers or household servants.

An examination of inspector reports provides some indication of children’s proficiency in this curriculum. Workhouse schools were subjected to regular inspections by a range of interested parties including workhouse chaplains, visiting committees comprised of several Poor Law Guardians, National Education inspectors,

⁹⁰ *Freeman’s Journal*, 10 Oct. 1871.

⁹¹ James P. Organ, *Hints on the educational, moral and industrial training of the inmates of our reformatories, prisons and workhouses* (Dublin, 1860), p. 12.

⁹² Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, pp 238-9.

⁹³ Ballinasloe Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1859. GCCA, G00/5/A/21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

and by Poor Law district inspectors. The inspection reports produced by workhouse chaplains generally focused upon children's proficiency in catechism and biblical knowledge. Chaplains' reports were occasionally critical of children's education, however, as through their additional employment as local clergymen, chaplains were some of the few workhouse officers with independence to openly criticise their own Board of Guardians. In 1851, for instance, the reports from the Presbyterian chaplain of the Belfast workhouse frequently relayed grievances reported to him by teachers who otherwise felt unable to complain to the Board directly.⁹⁵ In contrast, the reports submitted by visiting committees and by visitors to the workhouses were overwhelmingly positive in their portrayal of workhouse schools.⁹⁶ At the Belfast workhouse, the schoolteachers were required to submit weekly reports but they were rarely informative. In April 1861, the Belfast Board of Guardians ordered the schoolteachers 'to vary as may be found necessary their reports on the progress of the school children' as they consistently reported 'fair progress' each week.⁹⁷ Despite this order, the school reports remained unvaried. In January 1871, the Board of Guardians' minute book recorded that the teachers reported merely 'as usual'.⁹⁸

National Education inspectors gave a more consistent, independent, and professional form of school inspection than those conducted by local workhouse officials.⁹⁹ A comparison of National Education inspector reports provides an indication of varied standards of education between different workhouse schools.

⁹⁵ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1850 – Apr. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10. For further examples of school inspection reports by workhouse chaplains, see: Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1854. PRONI, BG/1/A/4; Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1858. PRONI, BG/1/A/7.

⁹⁶ For visiting committee reports, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1880. NAI, BG/78/A/74. For remarks made by visitors to workhouses, see: *Twenty-first annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [4042], H.C. 1867-68, xxviii, 339, pp 44-63.

⁹⁷ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24.

⁹⁸ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34.

⁹⁹ For a general study of the duties of inspectors within the National Education system, see: John Coolahan and Patrick F. O'Donovan, *A history of Ireland's school inspectorate, 1831-2008* (Dublin, 2009), pp 17-19, 21, 27-8.

Inspection reports for the Thurles workhouse school frequently recorded a low standard of education. On 22nd May 1871, an inspector reported:

1st Class: present 13. I find them pretty well prepared.

2nd Class: present 18. I examined them very fully in writing and arithmetic and am [sic.] by no means satisfied with their proficiency. Books wanted.

3rd Class: present 4. Reading might be better. I leave instructions for teaching this important subject. Answering in Grammar and Geography only middling. They failed in arithmetic. They also failed in Dictation. Writing bad.

4th Class: present 1. He reads fairly. Grammar and Geography pretty fair. He failed in arithmetic. In other respects his answering is fair. Writing middling.¹⁰⁰

The Board of Guardians dismissed the above report, however, and they claimed that ‘the boys were able to answer the questions put to them by the Inspector but would not do so’.¹⁰¹ On 19th October 1861, an inspector of the Belfast workhouse was more positive of children’s education, but he made criticisms also:

Boys’ school: 1st Class pupils answering generally fair. 2nd Class pupils acquitted themselves satisfactorily. Proficiency in spelling, grammar and geography very fair. Writing somewhat too angular, a rounder style preferable. To be improved in notation and simple subtraction, also tables. Proficiency fair in arithmetic.

Girls’ school: 1st Class pupils answering on the various short sentences pretty intelligent. A satisfactory proportion of the pupils throughout the remaining classes acquitted themselves respectably in the several subjects of the school programme.¹⁰²

These reports are informative of the standard of education in a particular school at the point of inspection, but the use of such inspection reports to undertake a comparative

¹⁰⁰ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1871. TS, BG/151/A/53. See also: Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/34; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1880. TS, BG/151/A/71; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1881. TS, BG/151/A/72; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1890. TS, BG/151/A/90.

¹⁰¹ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1871. TS, BG/151/A/53.

¹⁰² Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24.

assessment of the standards of education attained by children in different workhouses schools is hampered by the alleged suppression of highly negative reports by Boards of Guardians. Thus, in 1855, the Poor Law Commissioners instructed their district inspectors to report directly upon workhouses schools as they suspected that reports by National Education inspectors 'are not always fully communicated to the Commissioners in the minutes of the Guardians.'¹⁰³

Workhouse schoolteachers occasionally contested poor inspection reports on the basis that such reports did not acknowledge how interruptions to children's attendance held back their educational proficiency. In a report of the Belfast workhouse school from 1st July 1884, a Local Government Board inspector ordered a wholesale replacement of the teaching staff as the children were 'scandalously far behind in the most ordinary elements of education'.¹⁰⁴ The inspector noted that some boys, although on the attendance rolls for three or four years, had failed to answer basic questions and were thus 'doubly unfortunate in being not only inmates of the workhouse, but also pupils at the workhouse schools.'¹⁰⁵ During the resultant inquiry, however, the headteacher argued that '[t]he reason so many boys were so far back was because they often went into the house and out again' and that the attendance rolls 'conveyed no information' on the consistency of children's attendance which 'fluctuated considerably'.¹⁰⁶ As noted in Chapter Three, children's length of stay in a workhouse, and by extension their attendance at the workhouse school, was determined by how their families utilised poor relief in their economy of makeshifts.¹⁰⁷ Although orphaned and abandoned children remained in the workhouse and attended the school for longer periods of time, children with families increasingly tended to reside in the workhouse for a few weeks or a few days by the later nineteenth century. The negative impact of children's short-term lengths of stay upon the overall standard

¹⁰³ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ *Belfast News Letter*, 2 Jul. 1884.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Belfast News Letter*, 29 Dec. 1884.

¹⁰⁷ See: Chapter Three, pp 105-11.

of education at the Belfast workhouse continued into the early twentieth century. In 1911, an inspector noted that ‘a good many of them [children] belong to the in-and-out class, and, as a consequence, their school progress is slow.’¹⁰⁸

The recognition that children’s educational progress was impeded by interruptions in their attendance led to some officials blaming pauper parents for the low standards of literacy. In a report from 1857 on the Antrim workhouse school, a National Education inspector suggested that children’s education was held back because of ‘the folly of their parents who occasionally leave the house, taking with them their children; by this bad practice the children are much injured in every respect.’¹⁰⁹ Such criticism indicates a misunderstanding of the workhouse system as it overlooked, firstly, the obligation for parents to take their children out with them upon their discharge from an institution which was designed to discourage long-term residency, and, secondly, that children were admitted into a workhouse for the purpose of immediate relief for their destitution rather than to attend school.

There is a notable absence of official statistical returns related to children’s standards of literacy with which to examine pauper education at a national level. Much of this absence stemmed from lax administration. Many workhouse schools were without attendance rolls or exam records.¹¹⁰ In 1861, the *Irish Times* stated that ‘[i]t would be most desirable that an accurate account of these examinations, and of the progress of the children from year to year, was kept’ to facilitate public scrutiny of pauper education.¹¹¹ The sole return published by the Poor Law Commissioners detailed the standards of literacy among the 50,188 children between 9 and 15 in the workhouse schools on 2nd April 1853. The return indicated that 13.1 per cent of children could ‘neither read nor write’, 21.3 per cent ‘know alphabet and spelling’,

¹⁰⁸ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1911. PRONI, BG/7/A/87.

¹⁰⁹ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1857. PRONI, BG/1/A/6.

¹¹⁰ *Select committee of the House of Lords to inquire into the practical working of the system of National Education in Ireland*, p. 344

¹¹¹ *Irish Times*, 16 May 1861.

26.3 per cent could ‘read imperfectly’, and 39.3 per cent could ‘read and write’.¹¹² The methodology of this return was criticized by James Kavanagh, the head inspector under the National Education Commissioners. Kavanagh argued that the classifications in the statistics ‘are so vague and fairly admit of so wide an interpretation’ that their compilers ‘must necessarily have attached meanings to them founded on their own views’ rather than through standardized assessments, and that the statistical return was thus ‘calculated to mislead the public and to produce serious injury to the cause of popular education.’¹¹³ The National Education Commissioners subsequently ordered Kavanagh to conduct a special investigation into the educational standards in workhouse schools.

Between 13th May 1853 and 9th February 1854, Kavanagh visited 69 of the 141 workhouse schools affiliated to the National Education system.¹¹⁴ At the time of inspection, a total of 11,755 children were in attendance across the 69 schools but this represented a smaller attendance figure than the yearly average as most of Kavanagh’s visits occurred in September or October when the number of children in receipt of relief was at a minimum.¹¹⁵ The investigation noted several irregularities in school attendance records. Boys of up to 7 attended the girls’ schools of most workhouses as per regulations, but Kavanagh found that ‘several of our Inspectors did not distinguish, or else deemed it of no importance, the numbers of each sex in charge of the Schoolmistress’, an omission which precluded a comparison of boys’ and girls’ relative proficiencies.¹¹⁶ Additionally, many children were found to have been older than the ages recorded of them in the admission registers. Kavanagh suggested that ‘[t]he ages are ordinarily inaccurate, through ignorance and want of precision’ but occasionally ‘they are *designedly* increased’ by parents who hoped to secure larger rations for their children.¹¹⁷ Some older children allegedly claimed to be able-bodied

¹¹² *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 644.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 644-5.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 630.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 639-40.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 640.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 633.

adults as ‘some who are wholly illiterate object to going into school at twelve to fourteen to commence their alphabet amongst infants.’¹¹⁸ Many children were thus placed into classes that were unsuited to either their ages or abilities.

Table 6 details the numbers and percentages of the 11,755 children who were learning different subjects in the 291 school classes that were visited by Kavanagh. Few children had progressed in reading beyond either the First or Second books with only 12.5 per cent on the Third book, 5.1 per cent on the Fourth book, and 0.4 per cent

Table 6: The number of children learning various subjects in the 291 workhouse school classes visited by James Kavanagh, 1853-54

Subject	Boys n.	Girls n.	Total children n.	%
Reading				
First book of lessons	2,254	2,708	4,962	42.2
Second "	1,693	1,591	3,284	27.9
Sequel to Second "	692	702	1,394	11.9
Third "	720	749	1,469	12.5
Fourth "	275	329	604	5.1
Fifth "	29	13	42	0.4
Total Reading	5,663	6,092	11,755	100.0
Grammar	1,813	1,969	3,782	32.1
Geography	2,643	2,597	5,240	44.5
Arithmetic				
Simple Rules	1,531	1,585	3,116	26.5
Compound Rules	476	526	1,002	8.5
Proportion	336	126	462	3.9
Mental Arithmetic	335	261	596	5.1
Writing				
On Slates	1,525	1,572	3,097	26.3
On Paper	1,585	1,534	3,119	26.5

Source: Twentieth annual report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, p. 641

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 634.

on the Fifth book. Consequently, only 32.1 per cent of children possessed a sufficient level of literacy to learn grammar and for 44.5 per cent to learn geography. In arithmetic, 26.5 per cent of children were taught ‘simple rules’ while smaller proportions had progressed to more advanced topics. Writing was taught to 52.8 per cent of children of whom 26.3 per cent wrote on slates and 26.5 per cent had progressed to paper. Kavanagh concluded that workhouse children were at a comparably earlier stage of education than children attending ordinary National Schools. Of 29,890 pupils at 578 ordinary National Schools, 15.7 per cent were on the Third book, 7.4 per cent were on the Fourth book, and 1.2 per cent were on the Fifth book.¹¹⁹

The examination results of the children who were learning each of the above subjects are detailed in Table 7. In reading, 26.6 per cent of children who were learning or had progressed from the Second Book could read it ‘with accuracy’, while 45.7 per cent of children learning or progressed from the Third Book could read it ‘with ease and intelligence.’ These figures represented 14.8 per cent and 8.2 per cent respectively of all 11,755 children present at the time of Kavanagh’s visits. There was little correlation between children’s reading abilities and the length of time spent by them in the workhouse school despite some having been orphaned and long-term inmates in the workhouse. Whereas the attendance of such orphans was ‘more consecutive and less irregular’ than that of children with parents, Kavanagh reported that:

very few of those, who from being orphans had spent many years in the Workhouse, ... could read correctly a simple sentence in words of one syllable, and some ... had not learned to distinguish the letters of the alphabet.¹²⁰

This observation implies that low standards of literacy among children was not solely a consequence of the shorter and more interrupted periods of workhouse residency of

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 643.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp 639, 644.

Table 7: Examination results of children in the 291 workhouse school classes visited by James Kavanagh, 1853-54

Examination Results	Boys	Girls	Total children	Of children learning subject	Of all children present
	n.	n.	n.	%	%
Reading					
Able to read the Second Book with accuracy	784	956	1,740	26.6	14.8
Able to read the Third Book with ease and intelligence	414	553	967	45.7	8.2
Grammar					
Able to distinguish the Nine Parts of Speech	405	372	777	20.5	6.6
Able to Parse a simple sentence	224	221	445	11.7	3.8
Geography					
Acquainted with the outlines of the Map of the World	475	325	800	15.2	6.8
Acquainted with the Maps of Europe and of Ireland	236	235	471	9.0	4.0
Arithmetic					
Able to enter from dictation numbers up to Millions	226	94	320	6.1	2.7
Able to work Simple Subtraction	570	227	797	15.4	6.8
Able to work Compound Multiplication	283	121	404	19.4	3.4
Able to work Simple Proportion	94	12	106	87.4	0.9
Writing					
Able to write a tolerably fair legible hand	377	258	635	20.3	5.4
Able to write a good business hand with ease	101	75	176	5.6	1.5

Source: Twentieth annual report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, p. 641

children with parents. Of children learning grammar, 20.5 per cent were able to distinguish different grammatical parts of English while 11.7 per cent could compose a short sentence. Grammar was taught 'by incidental instruction during the explanation of the words in the reading lessons' but 34 schools 'contained no pupil able to distinguish the parts of speech.'¹²¹ Kavanagh found that 15.2 per cent of children learning geography were acquainted the map of the world, 9.0 per cent with the maps of Europe and Ireland, while no knowledge of geography was shown in 32 schools.

Of those learning arithmetic: 6.1 per cent 'were able to enter from dictation, a number of seven places of figures (such as 7,007,070)'; 15.4 per cent were able to subtract; 19.4 per cent could 'cast up correctly a question in multiplication of money (as 11 articles at 18s. 9³/₄d., each)'; while 87.4 per cent 'were able to work an easy question (as 2lbs. 5oz. of tea for 8s. 3d., how much would be had for a guinea)', although Kavanagh noted that this ability applied to only 0.9 per cent of all children.¹²² Of children taught writing, 20.3 per cent could 'write a tolerably fair legible hand, such as one meets with in the letter of a person who received a very rudimentary education', while 5.6 per cent could 'write rather a good business hand with ease and freedom.'¹²³ In 34 schools, no children were found able to write. Observing that 'only about 7 per cent of the whole of the pupils may be said to be so advanced in penmanship, as to be able to write a legible letter in a plain round hand', Kavanagh concluded that workhouse schools had proven ineffective in raising standards of literacy among pauper children.¹²⁴

Kavanagh's investigation drew rebuttal from Poor Law authorities. In their annual report for 1855, the Poor Law Commissioners attempted to discredit Kavanagh by claims that his evidence was 'not carefully procured or derived from proper

¹²¹ Ibid., pp 645-6.

¹²² Ibid., p. 645.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

sources' and that his conclusions were 'highly exaggerated'.¹²⁵ Kavanagh's statistics on children's attendance and examination results were dismissed by the Commissioners on the basis that 'it is not difficult to create very false impressions, out of a series of statistical facts, literally correct.'¹²⁶ Referencing the Dunfanaghy and North Dublin workhouse schools which had only 12 and over 700 children in attendance respectively, the Commissioners argued that workhouse schools could only be considered individually as national statistics misled through the 'leaving out of view local peculiarities.'¹²⁷ The Commissioners therefore declined to provide any statistics on workhouse schools to counter Kavanagh's evidence despite the prevalent publication of national statistics concerning other aspects of poor relief within their annual reports. Instead, the Commissioners petitioned the Lord Lieutenant that Kavanagh 'should not be allowed to continue his visitation of the Workhouse Schools' as they suspected that his report 'was likely to be used for the support of some speculative theories of pauper education' that were 'scarcely anywhere applicable in detail.'¹²⁸

The publication of Kavanagh's report soured subsequent relations between the central Poor Law authorities and the National Education Commissioners, and it precipitated the further suppression of information related to pauper education. The Poor Law Commissioners advised their National Education counterparts against future inquiries into workhouse schools by warning them that the voluntary adherences of Boards of Guardians to the National Education system 'would be materially endangered by any undue extension of an interference which rests on no legislative foundation.'¹²⁹ Despite their initial support for Kavanagh, the National Education Commissioners subsequently refused to publish his 'Vindication' against the claims of the Poor Law Commissioners. Kavanagh alleged that the shift in the National

¹²⁵ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 36-7.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 46, 50-1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Education Commissioners' position was occasioned by 'departmental jealousies and family interests' between the members of each set of commissioners.¹³⁰ Kavanagh argued further that in consequence of the condemnation of his report, the capacity for National Education inspectors to criticise the workhouse schools was diminished:

[t]he School Inspectors naturally are become timid, and fear to make strict Reports, or offer any suggestions upon the Workhouse Schools; and the Poor Law authorities, having completely silenced the National Board, pursue, without fear of exposure, their system of mismanagement.¹³¹

The subsequent absence of examination records or statistics relating to education in workhouse schools in official publications was symptomatic of a guarded response by Poor Law authorities against criticism of the system of pauper education.

For the remainder of the post-Famine era, contemporary opinions regarding pauper education were therefore based mainly upon perception and qualitative evidence rather than official statistics or inspections. In 1879, noting that '[o]f the results of Workhouse education there are no statistics', the social reformer Charles Chichester examined pauper education through the responses of 46 workhouse chaplains to a questionnaire on workhouse schools.¹³² Considered by Chichester as 'competent judges on the effect of these establishments on the defenceless children of our poor', 44 of these chaplains stated their disapproval of their workhouse schools.¹³³ For instance, a chaplain of the Wexford workhouse claimed that 'the whole system is wrong' and 'as bad as it can be' while a chaplain of the Celbridge workhouse stated that '[w]orkhouse training has not been attended with that success which we might desire' because '[t]he generality of Boards of Guardians are, from their position and want of education, totally incapable of directing the machinery requisite.'¹³⁴ With

¹³⁰ Anon., *Mixed education. The catholic case stated; or, principles, working, and results of the system of National Education; with suggestions for the settlement of the education question* (Dublin, 1859), pp 167-73.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹³² Chichester, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. ii.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. v.

such evidence, Chichester concluded that ‘the failure of the Workhouse system as an educational agent is almost universally felt and admitted.’¹³⁵ To counter these allegations, the Local Government Board published inspection reports by their own District Inspectors.¹³⁶ In 1909, a Royal Commission argued that these reports had stifled reform as they ‘abound in testimonies favourable to the workhouse schools and to the general success in life of the pupils brought up in them.’¹³⁷

Inspector reports on workhouse schools provide evidence that some improvements were attempted at the local level in the education of pauper children, however. In 1879, one Local Government Board inspector described how he had introduced a form of continuous assessment within his district to measure the rate of children’s improvements in writing.¹³⁸ The inspector had ordered that every teacher keep a book with two pages allocated for each child in attendance. Upon admission, a child was to write a line of text as well as their age and with the date of the inscription confirmed by the teacher. This procedure was to have been repeated every six months and the teacher was instructed also to record the children’s departures and readmissions into the workhouse. The inspector described this method as ‘very useful’ as ‘it has acted as a stimulus to exertion on the part of the teachers as well as the scholar’ because ‘it indicates pretty clearly what was done for each child in the way of education’. Rather than by order of the central Poor Law authorities, such attempts to improve the standards of education received by pauper children depended in large part upon local personalities and upon the initiatives of individual inspectors and teachers.

V: Workhouse teachers

The workhouse teacher was the officer responsible for the education, supervision, and discipline of pauper children. Yet, despite the significant role of teachers in children’s

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

¹³⁶ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 51-88.

¹³⁷ *Royal Commission on the poor laws and relief of distress. Report on Ireland*, [Cd. 4630], H.C. 1909, xxxviii, 1, p. 73.

¹³⁸ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 76.

experiences, historians know little about their identities, duties, or the conditions under which they worked. The role of the workhouse teacher was recognised by contemporaries as an important but difficult responsibility. The Poor Law Commissioners stated that, '[t]he duties of the Schoolmaster and the Schoolmistress are extremely important, not only to the children placed immediately under their charge, but likewise to the whole community.'¹³⁹ Similarly, the *Freeman's Journal* viewed workhouse teachers as 'the most responsible position of any officer in a union' with 'a most high and serious duty to perform', since:

[t]o them is entrusted the care of children, not such as have fathers and mothers or relations to look after their welfare, but homeless, helpless children ... whom it is the task of the workhouse teachers to transform into useful members instead of pests of society.¹⁴⁰

Describing the education of pauper children as 'a task which is hard and thankless enough', however, the *Freeman's Journal* considered that the teacher's task was 'made more hard and thankless still' by the apathy and parsimoniousness of Boards of Guardians.¹⁴¹ According to Kavanagh, '[o]ne of the very worst features' of workhouse schools was the penny-pinching of Boards of Guardians who hired insufficient numbers of qualified teachers, paid them inadequate salaries, and assigned to them 'irksome and improper extra duties' that made the position of workhouse teacher 'an office so repugnant to many of the common feelings of men.'¹⁴² This section explores the impact of teachers' working conditions upon children's education.

During the early post-Famine decades, many workhouses had insufficient numbers of teachers for the numbers of children in the schools. Table 8 shows the number of workhouse teachers and the average number of children per teacher by province in 1853. Nationally, there were 163 schoolmasters and 196 schoolmistresses who were individually in charge of an average of 110 and 123 children respectively.

¹³⁹ *Eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 29 Jul. 1880.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 646.

Table 8: The number of teachers and the average number of children per teacher in the workhouse schools of Ireland, 1853-54

Province	Schoolteachers			Average number of children per teacher	
	Male	Female	Total	Per Male	Per Female
	n.	n.	n.	n.	n.
Ulster	26	29	55	56	54
Munster	65	80	145	147	164
Leinster	42	51	93	101	104
Connaught	30	36	66	91	113
Total	163	196	359	110	123

Source: Twentieth annual report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, p. 646

Kavanagh found that ‘the amount of teaching-power is utterly disproportioned ... and unequally distributed’ between provinces.¹⁴³ Teachers in Munster oversaw averages of 147 and 164 children while those in Ulster taught averages of only 56 and 54. Yet such averages ‘afford a rather flattering view’ as some teachers were reportedly charged with classes of between 200 and 300 children in 27 workhouse schools.¹⁴⁴ National Education regulations stipulated that 75 children per teacher was the threshold for the hiring of an assistant teacher.¹⁴⁵ Of the 359 workhouse teachers, however, only 67 served as assistants while 292 were the sole teacher in their schools. Inspection reports suggest that ratios of children to teachers had reduced by the late-1860s in all but large urban workhouses.¹⁴⁶ This change was more a reflection of the reductions in the numbers of children rather than of the hiring of more teachers. At Newcastle in 1861, for instance, the Board of Guardians refused to hire a male teacher

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 647.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp 647-8.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 646.

¹⁴⁶ For examples, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1870. NAI, BG/78/A/55; *Belfast News Letter*, 16 Oct. 1872.

‘as they consider that within the next two months all the older boys will leave the workhouse’ due to seasonal fluctuations and the long-term reduction in the numbers of children.¹⁴⁷ Teachers were generally placed in charge of too many children of varying ages and stages of education in the same class.

High ratios of children to teachers contributed to low standards of education, particularly among younger children. Kavanagh stated that, ‘the teacher of a large school is obliged to abandon altogether the idea of either teaching or examining the junior classes within any interval that could reasonably effect good.’¹⁴⁸ In schools with only one teacher, breakdowns in discipline occurred as teachers were unable to supervise boys and girls while simultaneously maintaining the segregation of children by gender. In 1856, upon observing the Clifden school under the charge of a female teacher who was ‘giving three hours to the boys and three hours to the girls daily’, an inspector reported that:

[t]his arrangement seems to work very badly. The literacy proficiency of both boys and girls is at the lowest ebb, and what is still worse, all order and decorum seems to have vanished. The boys especially are free from all restraint and exercise no respect either for the teacher or any other person; ... until a male teacher is appointed matters will become worse and worse.’¹⁴⁹

Instead of hiring additional teachers, the Belfast and North Dublin Boards of Guardians appointed older children as paid school monitors to ‘stir up the energy of the school and render the children every day more proficient.’¹⁵⁰ Kavanagh advocated the appointment of a monitor ‘of good moral character, best abilities, and greatest aptitude for teaching’ per every 50 children.¹⁵¹ However, the Poor Law Commissioners disapproved of paid monitors on the basis that such ‘palpable

¹⁴⁷ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 565.

¹⁴⁸ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 646.

¹⁴⁹ Clifden Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1856. GCCA, GPL3/21.

¹⁵⁰ *Irish Times*, 22 Sep. 1859. See also: Belfast Board of Guardians, Minute Book, Jan. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10.

¹⁵¹ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 658.

inducements' encouraged children to remain in the workhouse, and that 'many of the poorer ratepayers may feel it to be unfair' that their own children did not receive gratuities at school.¹⁵² The Commissioners sanctioned reforms to education in the workhouse school only if the principle of less-eligibility was maintained.

Children's education was impeded also by the lack of training of many workhouse teachers. Table 9 shows that 68.4 per cent of teachers in 1853 had not been trained to National Education standards. Additionally, 53.7 per cent of teachers were unqualified 'probationers' while 27.7 per cent had attained Third Class qualifications, 14.5 per cent were Second Class, and only 4.1 per cent were First Class. At 14 workhouses, Kavanagh found particularly low standards of ability among teachers, many of whom had failed examinations in reading and arithmetic.¹⁵³ For instance, a Ballyshannon teacher 'could not even attempt to subtract ... nor multiply' and had 'no idea of geography' and 'the rudest knowledge of grammar', while a Dromore West teacher 'spells and writes badly, knows little arithmetic, and no geography whatever.'¹⁵⁴ Upon his conclusion that 'scarcely any of the Workhouse Teachers in Ireland are suited to their mission', Kavanagh recommended the establishment of a central training school specifically for workhouse teachers, but this recommendation was never implemented.¹⁵⁵ Whether the training and qualifications of workhouse teachers improved during the post-Famine era is unclear. Teachers were able to attend examinations organised by the National Education Commissioners, 'if they have leisure, inclination, and permission', but many Boards of Guardians refused to allow their teachers to attend while some deducted the salaries of substitutes from the salaries of teachers while at examinations.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² *Irish Times*, 14 Jul. 1859. See also: *Irish Times*, 4 Aug. 1859; *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 71-2.

¹⁵³ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 646-7, 649-51.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 650.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

¹⁵⁶ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 60; Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/7. See also: *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 629, 657; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24; North Dublin Board of

Table 9: The qualification class and training status of teachers in the workhouse schools of Ireland, 1853-54

Class and Rank		Male	Female	Total teachers	
		n.	n.	n.	%
First Class	1st Division	1	-	1	
	2nd Division	-	-	-	
	3rd Division	8	6	14	
	Total	9	6	15	4.1
Second Class	1st Division	7	8	15	
	2nd Division	19	18	37	
	Total	26	26	52	14.5
Third Class	1st Division	26	24	50	
	2nd Division	27	22	49	
	Total	53	46	99	27.7
Probationers	(Unclassed)	75	118	193	53.7
Total		163	196	359	100.0
Trained		60	53	113	31.6
Not Trained		103	143	246	68.4

Source: Twentieth annual report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland, p. 649

The hiring of poorly qualified teachers was due to the reticence of Boards of Guardians to advertise competitive salaries and the inability of the central Poor Law authorities to enforce higher wages.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, the refusal of many Boards of

Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1861. NAI, BG/78/A/37; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1870. NAI, BG/78/A/54; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1882. NAI, BG/78/A/77; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/32; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/33; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1881. TS, BG/151/A/73; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1890. TS, BG/151/A/90.

¹⁵⁷ See: *Freeman's Journal*, 23 Jun. 1847; *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, pp 344, 397; Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1853. PRONI, BG/1/A/3;

Guardians to adhere to the permissive National School Teachers Act of 1875 meant that their teachers did not qualify for additional gratuities based upon children's examination results in contrast to teachers at ordinary National Schools.¹⁵⁸ Inadequate teacher salaries reflected the unwillingness of many Boards of Guardians to raise the poor rate to fund pauper education as well as their belief that 'poor teachers are good enough for poor children.'¹⁵⁹ Vanessa Rutherford has argued that standards of teacher qualifications improved within Irish elementary education more broadly through the post-Famine era.¹⁶⁰ The employment of poorly qualified teachers continued in several workhouse schools into the early twentieth century, however. Upon the appointment of an unqualified teacher by the Killarney Board of Guardians in 1916, one Guardian remarked, 'I suppose anything is good enough for little paupers.'¹⁶¹ Teachers frequently complained of an absence of support from other workhouse officers or from their Boards of Guardians and several inquiries were held to investigate claims of the bullying of teachers, particularly of schoolmistresses, by other officers.¹⁶² There was widespread agreement among parties interested in pauper education that a lack of support for teachers and the penny-pinching of Boards of Guardians towards teachers' salaries were the main causes of poor standards of teaching in the workhouse school.

Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland, pp 653-5; *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 63; Anon., 'Begin at the beginning: workhouses and women's work', *The Irish Quarterly Review*, 8 (1859), p. 1184.

¹⁵⁸ For examples, see: Akenson, *The Irish education experiment*, pp 318-19; *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 72; *Irish Times*, 31 May 1875; *Belfast News Letter*, 18 Mar. 1876; *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Jan. 1877; *Belfast News Letter*, 8 Aug. 1877; *Freeman's Journal*, 29 Jul. 1880; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1891. TS, BG/151/A/90; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1881. PRONI, BG/7/A/45; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1891. PRONI, BG/7/A/55; *Belfast News Letter*, 11 Apr. 1900.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 197.

¹⁶⁰ Rutherford, 'Girls and the formation of modern Ireland', pp 42-3.

¹⁶¹ *Kerry News*, 21 Sep. 1916.

¹⁶² For examples of bullying and a lack of support for teachers, see: *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 653-5; Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, pp 207-8, 214-15, 219-20; *Belfast News Letter*, 11 May 1895; Downpatrick Board of Guardians Correspondence, c. 1905-1911. PRONI, BG/12/BH/1.

The imposition of additional duties upon teachers and their task of supervising large numbers of children was alleged to have contributed to the development of antagonistic relationships between pauper children and their teachers. In addition to the education of children, workhouse teachers were required to supervise children throughout the day and were responsible for their cleanliness, dress, exercise, and general welfare.¹⁶³ In 1857, a North Dublin Guardian stated that the teachers ‘were employed morning, noon, and night’ because ‘they were obliged to maintain a rigid surveillance’ over the children.¹⁶⁴ Susanne Day described the negative impact of constant supervision upon the social interactions between children and teachers:

[f]riction set up at lesson-time is not allayed by constant personal contact during the day, nerves become strained, acting and reacting upon each other, the teacher, unless he be a miracle of patience, tact and impartiality, sooner or later shows his dislike of the boy, he in turn ... is convinced that he is being ‘set upon’, and grows gloomy, morose and sullen. Day by day the pitiful little tragedy works on; ... either the boy’s resentment blazes out, ... or else the teacher, resorting to repressive measures, unconsciously crushes the spirt, the spontaneity and the energy out of the child, who becomes a stupid automaton, doomed to failure.¹⁶⁵

The above depiction of a tense social environment within the workhouse school is supported by several newspaper and inspection reports that detailed the use of derogatory language by some teachers towards children and the prevalence of an atmosphere of fear in the classroom.¹⁶⁶ Due to their working conditions, the Poor Law Commissioners noted that many teachers ‘leave on the first opportunity’, which further

¹⁶³ See: *Orders of the Poor Law Commission to unions in Ireland*, p. 11; Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1871. NLI, MS 12646; Arthur J. Moore, *Children in Irish workhouses* (London, 1878), p. 5; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1911. PRONI, BG/7/A/89.

¹⁶⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 21 May 1857.

¹⁶⁵ Day, ‘The workhouse child’, p. 174.

¹⁶⁶ For examples of derogatory language towards children, see: *Freeman’s Journal*, 14 Jan. 1863; *Belfast News Letter*, 29 Dec. 1884. For examples of children’s fear of teachers, see: Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/8; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1862. NAI, BG/78/A/39; O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, p. 17; Chichester, *Amalgamation of unions*, pp iv, xiv, xvi.

‘must destroy the parental relation’ between children and teacher.¹⁶⁷ The obligation upon teachers to both educate and supervise children was damaging to the children-teacher relationship which represented one of the few sources of social interaction with an adult available to children in a workhouse.

VI: Discipline and punishment

The negative social relationships between the children and teachers of many schools contributed to the imposition of stern regimes of discipline and severe punishments. Accounts from workhouse officers suggest that children’s misbehaviour was widespread, particularly in the urban workhouse schools with insufficient numbers of teachers for the adequate supervision of large numbers of children. Children were occasionally described as difficult to control. A North Dublin teacher described pauper boys as ‘the most incorrigible class that novel or history ever described’, while a South Dublin Guardian claimed that:

‘[t]he most difficult class to deal with are the young girls; ... they seem amenable to no persuasion, advice, or punishment. When they are corrected, even in the mildest manner, for any breach of regulations, they seem to lose all control of reason; ... their language, while in this state of excitement, is absolutely shocking.’¹⁶⁸

The minute books of Boards of Guardians contain numerous examples of children’s misbehaviour including absconding with clothes, fighting with other children, insubordination and violence towards officers, stealing food, and breaking furniture.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ *Seventh annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 17-18.

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 170; *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 203-4.

¹⁶⁹ See for examples: Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/7; Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1851 – Oct. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/8; Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1861. BG/5/A/25; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1850 – May 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; Belfast Jul. 1861 – Dec. 1861, A/24; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1881 – Jun. 1881, BG/7/A/45; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/67; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1911.

Children's misbehaviour is explored in greater detail in Chapter Eight with reference to the effects of institutionalisation upon children in the workhouse environment. This section examines the punishments received by children from their teachers in the workhouse school.

Rules for the punishment of children were stipulated in the workhouse regulations. The solitary confinement of children under 12 in dark rooms or during the night was prohibited, as was the corporal punishment of girls. The corporal punishment of boys was permitted but only if administered by the schoolmaster or master with 'a rod or other instrument, such as shall be seen and approved by the Board of Guardians', and not before six hours had elapsed since the offence to avoid excessive beatings in consequence of teachers' emotions.¹⁷⁰ Jane Humphries has argued that, 'workhouse schools were probably not much worse than the average' nineteenth-century school regarding corporal punishment, although she has pointed out that the separation of emotions from violent punishments was psychologically confusing for children.¹⁷¹ Workhouse records indicate that in some instances children received severe corporal punishments that did not adhere to these regulations, however. For example, Medical Officers occasionally complained to their Boards of Guardians that children required hospital treatment for injuries inflicted by the teachers.¹⁷² Teachers were usually chastised when injuries to a child were inflicted,

PRONI, BG/7/A/87; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/16; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1851 – Oct. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/17; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1860 – Sep. 1860. NAI, BG/78/A/35; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1861 – Feb. 1862. NAI, BG/78/A/38; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/56; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1891 – Jul. 1891. NAI, BG/78/A/94; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1860 – Jun. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/33; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1882. TS, BG/151/A/73

¹⁷⁰ *Orders of the Poor Law Commission to unions in Ireland*, p 5-7. See also: Antrim Board of Guardians Offence and Punishment Book, 1871-1914. PRONI, BG/1/O/3.

¹⁷¹ Humphries, 'Care and cruelty', p. 125, 127-34.

¹⁷² For examples, see: Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1845. PRONI, BG/5/A/2; Newry Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1846. PRONI, BG/2/A/4; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/17; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1854. NAI, BG/78/A/24; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1860. NAI, BG/78/A/34; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1882. TS, BG/151/A/73; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1881. PRONI, BG/7/A/45.

but in 1860 the North Dublin Board of Guardians dismissed a boy who had complained that the schoolmaster had ‘struck him across the face with a cane’ and ‘gave him 3 or 4 slaps with a cane on the back’ and they stated that ‘he was not improperly treated but was deserving of the punishment that he received.’¹⁷³ Although corporal punishment was nominally regulated, instances of severe punishments highlighted its openness to misuse.

Poor Law officials had a range of opinions on the effectiveness of corporal punishment in the discipline of pauper children. The Poor Law Commissioners considered that a reliance upon corporal punishment indicated ‘a want of proper qualifications’ on the part of teachers and they argued that, ‘[t]he milder the system, the better the discipline.’¹⁷⁴ However, one inspector argued that corporal punishment ‘is neither harsh nor severe, and is essential to the effective management of a public institution’, while a teacher claimed the restrictions to the use of corporal punishment contributed to the poor performance of workhouse schools.¹⁷⁵ John Taylor, a workhouse teacher, considered corporal punishment counterproductive in reforming children’s behaviour as ‘the teacher who makes a practice of whipping a child, forgets that that child possesses reasoning faculties.’¹⁷⁶ The use of corporal punishment had the potential to stir collective resentment and resistance among children towards workhouse officers. In November 1851, the North Dublin workhouse schoolmaster attempted to punish a group of boys with a strap, but the boys:

refused to submit, ... rose *en masse*, and seized on slates and other missiles, and hurled them at the heads of the master and his assistants. They then rushed out of the school and arming themselves with stones, smashed the windows of the school-room; ... it took the united exertions of the entire corps of wardmasters to subdue the rebels.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1860. NAI, BG/78/A/36.

¹⁷⁴ Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1845. PRONI, BG/5/A/2; *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 397.

¹⁷⁵ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board*, p. 60; *Freeman’s Journal*, 13 Dec. 1878; *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 Aug. 1879.

¹⁷⁶ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 172.

¹⁷⁷ *Freeman’s Journal*, 7 Nov. 1851.

For the above behaviour, 12 boys received ‘two dozen lashes on the bare back.’¹⁷⁸ The use of flogging as punishment provoked varying reactions from the Board of Guardians, however. One Guardian claimed that while ‘it was a painful duty to inflict corporal punishment, ... it became necessary’ as a parental duty upon the Guardians since ‘every father of a family must feel that on some occasions boys of sullen and refractory disposition were irreclaimable by mild measures.’¹⁷⁹ The Chairman ordered that ‘the mildest form of whipping, consistent with producing a salutary effect, should be directed’, but another Guardian stated that any form of flogging was ‘most truculent and inhuman’ as:

he was not prepared for the revolting sight their backs presented – in fact their flesh was one mass of excoriation; ... he felt shocked and disgusted at this exhibition, and could not but believe that such lashes could not have been inflicted by one who performed a reluctant though necessary duty.¹⁸⁰

Corporal punishment, particularly flogging, was controversial as a method of disciplining boys, and its controversy may have limited its infliction in some instances.

An alternative to corporal punishment was the committal of misbehaving children to prison. The imprisonment of children for misbehaviour in workhouse schools was especially prevalent during the 1850s. Between 1854 and 1859, 1,642 children received prison sentences that ranged from one day to one month for offences committed in the workhouse. The prison authorities repeatedly reduced the dietary for juvenile prisoners on the assumption that some pauper children purposely committed offences to get better food, but they also suspected that imprisonment was a convenient way for Boards of Guardians to remove unruly children and that it was therefore more

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

a reflection of the poor management of workhouse schools.¹⁸¹ One prison official alleged that children imprisoned for workhouse offences were mainly:

a class that it is at present difficult to manage in the workhouses, whom the guardians are tempted to send to gaol from not knowing in what other way to deal with them, and yet who are not, in the ordinary sense, confirmed criminals.¹⁸²

The Poor Law authorities argued that most committals were for violence or arson and that, ‘the milder the system of Workhouse punishment the greater necessity must exist for a resort to punishment in gaol’, but some children were imprisoned for minor misdemeanours including jumping on school desks.¹⁸³ The imprisonment of children was criticised by prison officials who argued that children were placed at risk of moral contamination by adult prisoners and some magistrates advocated the use of corporal punishment instead.¹⁸⁴ Whereas pauper education had been envisaged as a check against juvenile delinquency, some pauper children were introduced to criminality through their imprisonment for minor offences committed in the workhouse schoolroom.

VII: Conclusion

Education comprised a significant portion of children’s daily lives in the workhouse. The workhouse school was attended by a specific sub-section of the children of the poor: the most destitute and in receipt of indoor relief. However, pauper education must be considered as part of a wider system of elementary education for the labouring classes. Pauper education was widely lauded as an essential measure against the

¹⁸¹ *Twenty-ninth report of the inspectors-general on the general state of the prisons of Ireland, 1850*, [1364], H.C. 1851, xxviii, 357, p. xii; *Thirty-fourth report of the inspectors-general on the general state of the prisons of Ireland, 1855*, [2113], H.C. 1856, xxxiv, 165, p. xix.

¹⁸² *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, pp 348-9.

¹⁸³ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 37; *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 663.

¹⁸⁴ *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, pp 345-8; *Report form the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, pp 346-9, 352, 363, 473-6.

supposed tendency of pauper children towards hereditary pauperism as well as juvenile delinquency and criminality. It was also seen as a social responsibility on the part of the state towards the children under its care. The adoption of the curriculum of National Education into most workhouse schools was an attempt at providing pauper children with a comparable education to that received by the children of the labouring classes outside of the workhouse. Fluctuations in the workhouse populations meant that workhouse schools functioned differently from ordinary National Schools, however. The workhouse institution was not a school; it had a school in it. Children's attendance was determined by their destitution and their parents' capacity to leave the institution with their children, a point which contributed to a disconnect in how some officials tried to explain low standards of literacy and attainment among pauper children.

Boards of Guardians had considerable discretion over the management of their schools. There were therefore variations in the furnishing of schoolrooms, the daily timetables followed by children, and in standards of teaching. After the report published by Kavanagh which detailed low standards of literacy in workhouse schools in 1853, few records were published for an assessment of pauper education in subsequent years. The absence of sources was due partly to the reticence of the central Poor Law authorities to communicate poor results to a public who placed considerable importance upon the success of pauper education. An examination of the working conditions of workhouse teachers provides a new perspective on pauper education. The hiring of underqualified and underpaid teachers, each in charge of large numbers of children for long periods of time, gives context to the low standards of literacy in the workhouse schoolroom. These working conditions soured relations between children and their teachers and they were a factor behind the severity of punishments for misbehaviour. Literacy teaching was only one aspect of children's education. As explored in the next chapter, industrial training, with a view towards the hiring out of children as agricultural labourers and as domestic servants, was a major part of the curriculum of pauper education in Ireland.

Chapter Five

Children's work and industrial training

I: Introduction

Industrial training comprised a major part of children's education within the workhouse schools. Considered by many Poor Law authorities and social commentators alike as more relevant than literacy education for the future prospects of pauper children, industrial training was intended to prepare children for employment outside of the workhouse. The pre-eminence of industrial training in the workhouse school curriculum was in common with the educational provisions of other welfare institutions for poor children such as industrial schools and reformatories, but it contrasted with the curricula of most ordinary National Schools in which the education of children in literacy was emphasised. The scope of workhouse industrial training was narrow, prescriptive, and gendered. Boys' and girls' received training that was aimed at their presumed respective employments as agricultural labourers and domestic servants respectively. Although industrial training and pauper labour were significant elements in the experience of a workhouse childhood, they have received little attention from historians of the Poor Law in Ireland.

This chapter examines the provision of industrial training in the workhouse school. It explores the different types of industrial training undertaken by children, including the training of boys in trades and agriculture and the engagement of girls in domestic duties. As with children's education in literacy, there are few official statistical records on the numbers of children nationally who received industrial training beyond the early-1850s. However, the qualitative evidence examined herein indicates that the extent of industrial training peaked in the mid-1850s but declined thereafter as the numbers of children in workhouses declined. The chapter begins with a study of the broader system of pauper labour in the workhouses which provides

necessary context for the ideology and provision of children's industrial training under the Irish Poor Law.

II: Children and pauper labour

The Irish Poor Law distinguished between the labour required of able-bodied adults and the type of work expected from children while resident within a workhouse. Under the principle of less-eligibility, able-bodied adults were required to perform labour tasks that were 'of such a nature as to be irksome, and to awaken or increase a dislike to remain in the workhouse' as a condition for their receipt of relief.¹ Irksome labour tasks were part of the workhouse test of destitution but there was a recognition within Poor Law ideology that 'with the children the test is altogether inapplicable' and that instead 'they should be taught and trained to become useful members of the community.'² In a study of children's education under the New Poor Law in England and Wales, Francis Duke has argued that industrial training was intended as 'a general experience of work discipline ... in which output was clearly related to effort.'³ Rather than as punitive labour, the Poor Law authorities viewed industrial training as form of education that would instil among the children habits of industriousness, prepare them for employment, and break the perceived cycle of hereditary pauperism. The provision of industrial training was one of the key distinctions between the welfare of children and able-bodied adults within the workhouse. However, this section reveals that during the late-1840s and early-1850s, there was little distinction between the types of work done by children and adults.

During the Great Famine, the rapidly increasing numbers of workhouse inmates precipitated a step-change in the scale and output of pauper labour. By the late-1840s, support for an expansion of pauper labour had increased among the

¹ Anon., 'The destitute poor of Ireland', p. 275.

² Ibid.

³ Duke, 'Pauper education', p. 84.

ratepaying public and within Poor Law officialdom. In 1848, articulating a popular argument that more labour tasks would provide a greater level of deterrence against relief applicants and would thereby reduce workhouse overcrowding and prevent idleness among inmates, the *Belfast News Letter* demanded that the Poor Law Commissioners ‘let the workhouses be *workhouses*.’⁴ Boards of Guardians, particularly those of southern and western Poor Law Unions that had experienced the greatest levels of demand for relief during the Great Famine and had incurred considerable debts, saw pauper labour as a means to reduce costs and achieve self-sufficiency for their institutions. Workhouse inmates were employed in a wide range of occupations including agricultural cultivation, shoemaking, tailoring, embroidery, lace-work, knitting, spinning and weaving flax and wool, carpentry, baking bread, painting, tin-making, oakum and coir picking, breaking stones, and grinding corn.⁵ The products of this labour was either used to clothe and feed inmates or was sold by Boards of Guardians for the profit of their Unions.

Pauper labour was a significant source of income in the accounts of some Poor Law Unions. At Thurles, the Master reported that £1,233 15s. 8d. of savings been effected ‘by the profitable employment of paupers’ during the six months ending on 29th September 1851.⁶ The Thurles Guardians, who had maintained that ‘[t]he principle that every institution should if possible support itself is so self-evident, so based on common sense, it should require no argument to assist it’, were so pleased with this report that they spent some of the savings on its publication in local newspapers.⁷ The Thurles Boards perhaps published the report to show ratepayers that they were exploiting pauper labour to the fullest in order to maintain low rates, but the Commissioners informed the Guardians that the use of Union funds for such

⁴ *Belfast News Letter*, 5 Dec. 1848.

⁵ *Abstract return from Poor Law Unions in England, Wales and Ireland on employment in workhouses or land attached, July 1852*, [513], H.C. 1852-53, lxxxiv, 299.

⁶ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1851. TS, BG/151/A/15.

⁷ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1851. TS, BG/151/A/13; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1851. TS, BG/151/A/15.

publications was inappropriate.⁸ The Poor Law Commissioners were supportive of the employment of pauper inmates for the purpose of workhouse self-sufficiency as they declared ‘the labour of the workhouse inmate being in fact the property of the Union.’⁹ However, the Commissioners opposed the employment of paupers for the accruing of profits beyond self-sufficiency as they considered that this was:

directly calculated to bring pauper labour into competition with the independent workman, and thereby to depress the condition of the latter, and, probably, reduce many to the necessity of being applicants for relief.¹⁰

The concern that unwaged pauper labour would undercut and pauperise independent labourers placed a cap upon the industrial output of workhouse inmates, including children.

Despite the ideological distinctions between adult pauper labour and that of children, many children were set to the same arduous and unskilled labour tasks as adults during the latter years of the Great Famine. Such employments were partly an expedient method by Boards of Guardians to maintain discipline and provide occupation for children during periods of overcrowding, but these labour tasks also served to maximize the industrial output of pauper labour as well as the savings generated on behalf of the ratepayers. Moreover, some Poor Law Guardians appear to have equated industrial training for pauper children with the assignment of unskilled labour tasks.¹¹ Nationally, the 12,396 children aged between 9 and 14 and the 891 children aged between 5 and 8 who were assigned to labour tasks on 1st July 1852 together accounted for 23.1 per cent of the 57,521 paupers employed in the workhouses (of a total inmate population of 184,965).¹² The employment of children in unskilled labour was most prevalent in south-western Poor Law Unions. For

⁸ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1851. TS, BG/151/A/15.

⁹ Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1848. PRONI, BG/5/A/5.

¹⁰ *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1243], H.C. 1850, xxvii, 449, pp 9-10. See also: *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 12-14.

¹¹ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, pp 209-13.

¹² *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 157.

example, boys in the Thurles workhouse were assigned to stone-breaking and to dig ‘new cesspools’ with the able-bodied men while the sale of oakum mats and picked-rope produced by the ‘Blind Boys Department’ of the Tipperary Union generated £33 11s. 6d. worth of savings for the ratepayers.¹³ Critics of the assignment of pauper children to unskilled labour tasks argued that such tasks not only contravened the principle of less-eligibility, but were also cruel and counterproductive as they taught children to resent work.¹⁴ For instance, in his report on children’s education in workhouse schools in 1853, James Kavanagh stated that ‘[m]uch injury is, I fear, caused through abuse of the desire for the Industrial employment of children.’¹⁵ The employment of children in unskilled and monotonous labour tasks for long periods reduced the amount of time that children spent in school and contributed to a lowering of the standards of literacy in the workhouse schools.

The employment of children upon capstan mills turned public and official opinions decidedly against the employment of children in unskilled labour tasks. Capstan mills were a form of treadmill for grinding grain that was turned by the steps of adults and children upon the spokes of the wheel. In the late-1840s, capstan mills were installed in the Cork, Midleton, Killarney, Athlone, South Dublin, Thurles, Cashel, Tipperary, Belfast, and Waterford workhouses.¹⁶ Capstan mills were condemned as cruel. Denis O’Connor, a Medical Officer of the Cork workhouse, described the mills as ‘the most diabolical contrivance ever invented for a workhouse’ on which ‘of all classes, the poor children suffered most from this infernal machine.’¹⁷ O’Connor recounted the treatment exacted upon the almost 100 boys employed on the Cork mill during the late-1840s:

¹³ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1850. TS, BG/151/A/12; *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 741-3.

¹⁴ William N. Hancock, ‘Should Boards of Guardians endeavour to make pauper labour self-supporting, or should they investigate the causes of pauperism?’, *Journal of the Dublin Statistical Society*, 1 (1851), p. 10.

¹⁵ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 678.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 676; Lanigan, ‘Tipperary workhouse children and the Famine’, pp 68-9.

¹⁷ O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, p. 49.

they clung to the handles as close as clustering bees; some pushed it, others only held on, and were dragged round; whilst the miller, being required to grind a certain quantity per hour, if the wheel did not move fast enough, came out and lashed the young slaves to his heart's content.¹⁸

In 1853, Kavanagh likewise condemned the continued employment of children upon capstan mills due to the unskilled nature of the labour and the risks it posed to children's health:

It requires no skill, as it is literally merely pushing a stick; ... it tends directly to increase the stupor of the already dull children, and is attended with considerable danger, as when children fall, which they often do, they are walked over by numbers before the machine can be stopped.¹⁹

Mills were considered especially dangerous for girls whose morality was alleged to have been contaminated through working alongside 'girls of the town'.²⁰ Kavanagh argued that should the Poor Law Commissioners have witnessed a capstan mill 'worked by little girls', then 'they would at once order that at least females should be exempted from this employment.'²¹ The Poor Law Commissioners responded that mill work was 'very light' for children because hundreds worked the mill simultaneously, but they also ordered an end to the employment of children upon capstan mills as it was 'not considered the most desirable description of employment'.²² Instead, Boards of Guardians were ordered to replace unskilled labour tasks with a more structured programme of industrial training that would prepare children for their future employment as independent adult labourers.

Adult pauper labour also diminished in scale from the mid-1850s as the number of adult recipients of indoor relief declined. Many of the occupations to which

¹⁸ Ibid., pp 49-50.

¹⁹ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 676.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 679.

²² *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 113-14.

workhouse inmates had been assigned, particularly those involving textile production, were economically viable only upon a large scale.²³ The presence of few able-bodied adults in most workhouses meant that pauper labour effectively ceased in all but the large urban workhouses by the early 1860s. Yet, many social commentators viewed the absence of pauper labour as a mockery of the concept of a workhouse and that it indicated the lax enforcement of the workhouse test by Boards of Guardians. In 1858, William Kelly, a proponent of the use of pauper labour to reduce the costs of poor relief upon ratepayers, claimed:

One rarely hears the term Workhouse, in Ireland; in ordinary conversation the Union Mansion is invariably called the Poor-house, and with great propriety ... it is not a house in which steady, useful, and continuous work is made a portion of the every-day ... it is not a house in which self-dependence and self-respect are shown to spring from honest labor [sic].²⁴

In 1898, Lord Monteagle, similarly criticised the absence of pauper labour in the workhouses before a meeting of Poor Law reformers: ‘A place where no work is done – a workhouse!’²⁵ The Poor Law authorities argued that such criticism was misdirected and they maintained instead that ‘success in the management of a Workhouse is evidenced rather by the absence of persons able to work’.²⁶ During the late nineteenth century, based on the belief that work would provide exercise and relieve the boredom of residency in a workhouse, some Boards of Guardians attempted to set labour tasks for non-able-bodied inmates including for the aged and infirm as well as for mothers with infant children. Such attempts were met with resistance from inmates heretofore exempt from labour. In 1901, the Belfast Master reported that the women and elderly inmates who had been set to basket-making had only ‘worked for a day or two, and refused to continue unless they were paid’ for ‘they are under the

²³ O’Mahony, *Cork’s Poor Law palace*, pp 146-51.

²⁴ James Hayes, ‘The adult and young of the poor-house: Irish waste land settlements, versus emigration and foreign wild land settlements. Specially addressed to the Poor Law Guardians of Ireland’, *The Irish Quarterly Review*, 8 (1858), p. 689.

²⁵ *Kerry Sentinel*, 29 Oct. 1898.

²⁶ *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 13.

impression that it is for the benefit of the house when it is in reality for the sake of their health, and also amusement.’²⁷ For much of the later nineteenth century, children’s industrial training was the main form of pauper labour conducted within workhouses.

III: Industrial training and pauper education

The promotion of industrial training in the workhouses during the 1850s was driven in large part by widely held views that the large numbers of pauper children represented a potential resource of cheap labour that would stimulate the economic revival of the country. Peter Gray has argued that, ‘[t]he 1850s were a decade of extraordinary optimism ... for social and economic thinkers’ who regarded the Poor Law as a necessary mechanism that could contribute to the economic remoulding and future prosperity of Ireland.²⁸ The casting of pauper children as a cheap labour resource suggests that they were one element upon which such optimism was based. In 1851, the Board of Irish Manufactures and Industry described pauper children as reservoirs of industrial labour with which ‘[e]nterprising men here and there would start manufactories seeing that they could get disciplined labour at a low rate.’²⁹ As explored in the previous chapter, the view that pauper children represented an economic opportunity was one motivation behind calls for a greater provision of pauper education. However, such calls were frequently explicit that industrial training was the principal form of education that pauper children should receive. When contrasted with improvements in literacy, industrial training was popularly viewed as economically more expedient for the country as well as more relevant for the expected prospects of pauper children. The Board of Irish Manufactures and Industry argued that if children were provided with industrial training, ‘in that way the workhouses

²⁷ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/68. See also, Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/67; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1881. NAI, BG/78/A/76; Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1889. NLI, MS 12668.

²⁸ Gray, ‘Irish social thought’, pp 144-6.

²⁹ *Freeman’s Journal*, 21 Feb. 1851.

could be made training schools all over Ireland, and be converted into the agent for rebuilding up the country.’³⁰ This represented a remarkable shift in public perceptions of the workhouses which, only several years previously, had been the overcrowded sites of infectious disease, mass mortality, and family disintegrations.

The central Poor Law authorities shared the view that industrial training was more important for pauper children than schooling in literacy. The necessity and appropriateness of industrial training for pauper children had been established from the inception of the Irish Poor Law. In his instructions on workhouse management communicated to Boards of Guardians in 1842, George Nicholls stated that, ‘[t]he only good education is that which fits and qualifies a person for the performance of his or her duties in that station in life in which it has pleased Providence to place them.’³¹ Nicholls thus argued that for children, ‘the hands must be taught and accustomed to labour, for with these the pauper children in our Workhouses will have to earn their livelihood’.³² In their annual reports from the early-1850s, the Poor Law Commissioners repeatedly stressed the urgency of imparting children with industrial training as the best means of removing children from the workhouse permanently and thereby replenish the pool of adult labour that had diminished through emigration. The Commissioners stated that ‘we have felt that literary knowledge alone without industrial training will not enable a boy or girl of 15 on leaving the Workhouse to obtain employment’, and that ‘the drain caused by emigration has rendered it of so much importance to make available to the utmost extent the existing amount of labour in Ireland.’³³ The discharge from the workhouses of 204,253 young persons of between 12 and 18 years old during the period 1849-54 was credited by the

³⁰ Ibid. For similar sentiments on the significance of industrial training for pauper children for the economic development of Ireland, see: *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Aug. 1848; *Belfast News Letter*, 5 Dec. 1848; *Belfast News Letter*, 24 Dec. 1851; *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Feb. 1852; *The eighteenth report of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, [1582], H.C. 1852-53, xlii, 1, p. 718.

³¹ *Eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 11.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 7; *Seventh annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 17.

Commissioners as 'better founded, perhaps, on the industrial training, than on the literary education which these young persons have received'.³⁴ Edward Senior argued that the primacy of industrial training over literary education in Irish workhouse schools was similar to 'all benevolent institutions for the education of the children of the poor at home and on the continent'.³⁵ Other welfare institutions for poor children in nineteenth-century Ireland similarly emphasised industrial training over literary education.³⁶

Although the National Education curriculum was adopted by most Boards of Guardians, nevertheless a greater emphasis was placed upon industrial training in workhouse schools than in ordinary National Schools. The Poor Law and National Education authorities both agreed that pauper children required more industrial training to lift them from destitution than the children of the labouring classes more generally. For example, Kavanagh held that industrial training was second only to religious education in the elevation of workhouse children out of pauperism.³⁷ Moreover, notwithstanding his criticisms of low standards of literacy in the workhouse schools, Kavanagh advised Boards of Guardians against focusing upon literacy in the fashion of ordinary National Schools as, '[i]n reference to Workhouse Schools ... any system of mere literary instruction pursued in them, would in itself be incomplete in the case of pauper children.'³⁸ The primacy of industrial training in the education of pauper children persisted through the post-Famine era.³⁹ Despite their frequent clashes

³⁴ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 15-16

³⁵ *Select Committee of House of Lords to inquire into practical working of system of National Education in Ireland*, p. 1194.

³⁶ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 26-31; Cooper, *The Protestant Orphan Society*, pp 147-9; Raftery and Parkes, *Female education in Ireland*, pp 24-5.

³⁷ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 670.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 627.

³⁹ For examples, see: H. L. Geary, 'The importance of industrial education', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 6 (1870), pp 44-51; W. F. Bailey, 'Primary education with a review of the German, Irish and English systems', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 8 (1884), pp 473-4; G. T. P., 'Manual training and technical instruction in Ireland', *The New Ireland Review*, 12 (1899), pp 171-87; F. Gorman, 'Practical education in National Schools', *The New Ireland Review*, 12 (1900), pp 350-7.

on the management of workhouse schools, National Education officials therefore shared the same ideological position as their Poor Law counterparts in the view that industrial training was the most appropriate form of education for pauper children.

The preference for industrial training reduced the time available for literacy teaching in workhouse schools. The original workhouse regulations stipulated that, 'industrial training and occupation should be so arranged as not to interfere with regular tuition in the school.'⁴⁰ However, Boards of Guardians were reported to have 'readily altered' their school timetables to accommodate more industrial training at the expense of literacy education.⁴¹ Boards of Guardians valued industrial training as the means by which to attract potential employers for pauper children and workhouse schoolteachers considered the instruction of pauper children in industrial training as the most important aspect their duties.⁴² A Belfast schoolmaster stated that his responsibility was 'aimed chiefly at preparing the children under my care by inculcating the principles of industry and diligence ... in addition to imparting a practical education.'⁴³ In 1893, a proposal from the Belfast Church of Ireland Chaplain that the boys should learn music as a 'humanising and civilising influence' that would 'lift them up the social scale' was opposed by the Belfast teachers on the basis that it would reduce the time available for industrial training. Mr Madden, the head schoolmaster, argued that music was less relevant than industrial training for pauper children and that, 'the latter should not be replaced by the former, which was only one of the refinements and ornaments of life.'⁴⁴ Teachers may have prioritised industrial training partly because of the importance placed by their Boards of Guardians upon the hiring out of children from an early age. Alternatively, Deirdre Raftery and Susan Parkes have suggested that the low qualifications of most workhouse schoolteachers

⁴⁰ *Eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 11.

⁴¹ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 53.

⁴² Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24.

⁴³ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34.

⁴⁴ *Belfast News Letter*, 19 Jul. 1893.

precluded the effective education of pauper children in anything other than industrial training.⁴⁵

Children's industrial training was narrow in scope and prescriptive in preparing children for their employment as either agricultural labourers or as domestic servants. Several scholarly studies have explored the limited content of children's industrial training in English workhouse, but the ideological and practical factors that underlay this narrow curriculum have been unresearched.⁴⁶ While the principles of less-eligibility were supposedly inapplicable to the education of pauper children, the limited scope of industrial training partly reflected ratepayers' concerns that pauper children should not receive an education superior to that attainable by the children of independent labourers.⁴⁷ As with the concerns that adult pauper labour risked the undercutting of independent traders, such arguments were expressed also regarding the industrial training of poor children. In 1880, the inspector of industrial schools in Ireland reported that, 'farmers, even with large farms, complain that industrial school children receive a training and instruction in trades which their sons and daughters cannot hope to obtain.'⁴⁸ In 1861, stating his views on pauper education before a parliamentary select committee, Archbishop Paul Cullen argued that children should be provided with only a rudimentary level of industrial training lest the children develop unrealistic aspirations that would end with disappointment:

those children are destined to have a shovel or a spade, ... and if they are not made strong and hardy, and trained to the menial occupations which they will have to fill, any education supplied to them is of little value, and will only render them more unhappy.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Raftery and Parkes, *Female education in Ireland*, pp 46-50.

⁴⁶ See: Crompton, *Workhouse children*, pp 153-9, 193-5; Anne Digby, *Pauper palaces*, (London, 1978); Duke, 'Pauper education', pp 69-78; Livingstone, *Pauper education*, p. 88.

⁴⁷ See: Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 29-31, 118-19, 137-8; Raftery and Parkes, *Female education in Ireland*, pp 24-5; Robins *The lost children*, pp 233-43.

⁴⁸ *Eighteenth report of the inspector appointed to visit reformatory and industrial schools of Ireland*, [C 2692], H.C., 1880, xxxvii, 373, p. 26.

⁴⁹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 197.

The prescriptive nature of industrial training was also reflective of the narrow range of occupations available to the labouring classes in post-Famine Ireland, but it also appeared to overlook the availability of urban and industrial employment in north-east Ulster. In 1879, a Local Government Board inspector stated that, '[i]n the existing condition of Ireland the ordinary vocation of most boys ... would appear to be agricultural labour' while 'girls seem destined to become domestic or farm servants.'⁵⁰ Rather than facilitate social mobility, industrial training was intended to prepare pauper children for employment within the limited range of occupations available to the labouring classes.

By the early twentieth century, some commentators on pauper education criticised the prescriptiveness of children's industrial training on the basis that it limited the prospects of pauper children and stifled their individuality. Susanne Day, a Cork Guardian, argued that industrial training effected 'a levelling down instead of a levelling up of capacity' for 'all are poured into the same mould, ... being subjected to the same treatment and destined to the same end.'⁵¹ Suggesting that the argument for prescriptive industrial training as the only appropriate education for pauper children was self-fulfilling, Day stated that '[i]f it be contended that they are not fit for anything else, it may with equal truth be contended that they are seldom fitted for anything else.'⁵² This chapter will now turn towards the examination of the prescriptive and gendered types of industrial training received by boys and girls.

IV: Boys' industrial training

Instruction in agricultural labour on the workhouse farm was the most common form of industrial training for boys. In 1847, the Poor Law Commissioners had empowered Boards of Guardians to acquire up to 25 acres of land for the instruction of boys in

⁵⁰ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 62.

⁵¹ Day, 'The workhouse child', p. 174.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

agricultural work. By September 1852, farms had been established at 126 workhouses with a total of 1,254 acres under cultivation.⁵³ The average size of workhouse farms was 9.9 acres, but acreages varied considerably with several exceeding 25 acres and some comprising less than a single acre. Regionally, the largest farms were in Munster where some were over 40 acres and the smallest were in Connaught where Boards of Guardians had limited funds for the purchase of land and had the lowest numbers of children in their workhouses.⁵⁴ For farms that were established at workhouses with schools connected with the National Education system, a free stock of agricultural books was supplied as well as a gratuity of £15 for the employment of an agriculturalist to instruct the boys.⁵⁵ Workhouse farms generated financial savings through the feeding of inmates with the produce of the farm, and they served also to remove children from the perceived dangers of moral contamination in the workhouse ‘to favourably circumstanced farms, completely detached and at some distance from the main house’.⁵⁶

There were disagreements among the Poor Law Guardians of urban workhouses on the relevance of agricultural training for pauper boys. Such disagreements on the Board of the North Dublin workhouse were documented in newspaper reports between 1849 and 1851. These reports recorded many of the arguments that were employed in support and in opposition to agricultural training. Expressing the view that agricultural instruction was necessary for the economic redevelopment of Ireland, Mr Arkins stated that ‘[i]t was a shame to see the land going to waste’ and that ‘the question was simply this, whether they were or were not to instruct the people in the only trade left to them now – namely, that of agriculture.’⁵⁷ Another argument in support of improved agricultural instruction was that boys who

⁵³ *Return from Unions in Ireland of workhouse farm and manufacturing accounts, 1852*, [904], H.C. 1852-53, lxxxiv, 625.

⁵⁴ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 673-4.

⁵⁵ *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 77.

⁵⁶ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 670.

⁵⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Sep. 1849.

had been hired out as farm labourers frequently returned to the workhouse because of their ignorance of agricultural work.⁵⁸ Several Guardians argued that farm work would thus ‘benefit the rising generation’ and ‘enable them to support themselves by their own labour hereafter.’⁵⁹ Other Guardians considered training in manufacturing as a better basis for future economic prosperity. In reference to the prevalence of inefficient agricultural practices among the labouring classes, Mr Roper argued that ‘it was not the province of the poor law board to remedy the evil that had so long existed in this country.’⁶⁰ However, some Guardians believed that poor children from cities were inherently unsuited to agricultural labour regardless of the amount of agricultural training they received. Mr Barlow argued that ‘it would be much more advisable to have the children ... educated in the trades which had been followed by their fathers and their grandfathers’ as ‘[i]t should be remembered that this was a metropolitan workhouse, and that nineteen-twentieths of the children in it were taken from the city districts of the union.’⁶¹ Another Guardian suggested that training in manufacturing was more appropriate for their Union on the basis that ‘a city board of guardians were not a proper body to superintend agricultural pursuits.’⁶² Despite these disagreements, a farm was established for the instruction of the boys in agriculture at their accommodation sheds in Glasnevin several miles from the workhouse in 1850.

The agricultural instruction of pauper boys was envisaged by officials as a method to improve farming practices among the labouring classes and instil children with an industrious work ethic. In 1852, a National Education inspector observed that agricultural lessons at the Newtownards workhouse made boys enthusiastic about field work ‘which they otherwise would not feel’.⁶³ The inspector noted that agricultural lessons helped boys ‘quickly discern the reasons why and what improperly produces

⁵⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 16 Aug. 1849.

⁵⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 19 Dec. 1850; *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Jan. 1851.

⁶⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Sep. 1849.

⁶¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Jan. 1851.

⁶² *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Sep. 1849.

⁶³ *Eighteenth report of the Commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, p. 712.

bad crops.’⁶⁴ A visitor to the Lismore workhouse farm claimed that the boys’ efforts in tending their crops would mean that ‘a principle of respect for order and property is developed and strengthened in the youthful mind.’⁶⁵ National Education officials contended that workhouse farms effected moral and agricultural improvements among the general population also. An inspector of the Clones workhouse farm observed that during the processes of drainage, hedge removal, and the use of bone fertilizers, ‘[m]any of the gentlemen and farmers of the neighbourhood, regarding these operations as an experiment, were curious as to the result and made frequent visits’.⁶⁶ The inspector thereby concluded that ‘the farm, as a model of agriculture, has hitherto extended a most beneficial influence upon the mode of cultivating the surrounding districts.’⁶⁷ However, the Poor Law and National Education authorities noted that workhouse farms usually failed to lead to agricultural improvements due to inefficient management by Boards of Guardians.

As with the effect of inadequate numbers of trained teachers on children’s education in literacy in the workhouse schools, agricultural training on most workhouse farms was hampered by a lack of sufficiently qualified instructors. In 1852, the Poor Law Commissioners outlined the desirable characteristics of an ‘agriculturalist teacher’:

He should possess a thorough knowledge, both practical and theoretical, of the most improved systems of farming; and that he should be able to impart this knowledge ... not only by actual working on the ground, but orally, by frequent lectures in plain language adapted to the understanding of his hearers. He should be active, diligent, and watchful.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Irish Times*, 16 Jul. 1868.

⁶⁶ *Eighteenth report of the Commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, p. 716.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for the administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 134.

Yet, many workhouse farm instructors failed to fulfil such criteria as, although experienced in farming, they possessed no formal qualifications. For instance, an inspector observed that the Killarney agriculturalist teacher:

though a tolerably good practical farmer, was not in my opinion suited for imparting a theoretical knowledge of farming to the boys under his charge. He knew little or nothing of Agricultural Chemistry, and although he knew that certain results, under certain circumstances, would follow certain operations, he could not assign the reasons for its being so.⁶⁹

The inspector blamed the failings of the agricultural instructor for the lack of enthusiasm for farm work among the boys who ‘take but little interest in learning their business, and seized every opportunity of lounging and skulking work.’⁷⁰ During his inspection of workhouse schools in 1853, Kavanagh found that agricultural instruction was generally undertaken by workhouse schoolteachers as few Boards of Guardians had hired specialist agriculturalist teachers. Agricultural textbooks were thus seldom used as teachers did not understand them and unspecialized teachers were unable to provide ‘such clear, simple, and full explanations ... of treating soils, seeds, crops, cattle, and manures, as could be comprehended by young boys.’⁷¹ Further demands were thus placed upon already overstretched teachers who were required to provide between two and five hours of agricultural instruction daily in addition a minimum of three hours of literacy teaching in the schoolroom.⁷²

The low standard of agricultural instruction on workhouse farms stemmed partly from the novelty of agricultural education as a concept in Ireland. John Taylor, a North Dublin schoolmaster, alleged that ‘the idea of *learning agriculture* is highly preposterous’ as ‘that which is emphatically the trade of an Irishman, nobody ever thinks of learning, ... [t]he idea is laughed at!’⁷³ Boards of Guardians tended to view

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 673-4.

⁷² *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for the administering of the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 78.

⁷³ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, pp 211-12.

their workhouse farms as a source of revenue rather than solely for industrial training and the Poor Law Commissioners observed that ‘in a small number of cases only can it be said that the intentions of the State have been thoroughly carried into effect.’⁷⁴ The parsimony and in some cases indebtedness of Boards of Guardians meant that farms were located on cheap but unsuitable land that was either ‘in a worn out state’ or ‘swampy’ and in need of extensive drainage and levelling.⁷⁵ The small amount of revenue produced from children’s agricultural work turned some Guardians from advocates into opponents of workhouse farms even though, as one inspector noted, ‘they were warned ... that the probability was, that, *directly*, it would hardly pay its own expenses.’⁷⁶ Guardians were encouraged instead to view agricultural instruction as a long-term saving through the permanent removal of boys from the workhouse as trained agricultural labourers.⁷⁷ However, to increase the profits on their farms, Boards of Guardians frequently assigned boys labour tasks that were too difficult, unsuited to their ages, and counterproductive for the purposes of industrial training. A National Education agricultural inspector reported:

I often find an implement of heavy and rude construction, that would try the physical powers of an adult, placed in the hands of a boy of 10 or 12 years of age, which not only prevents him from effecting much good for the time being, but, by rendering his work unnecessarily difficult and painful, disgusts him with labour, and seriously mars his future progress and usefulness.⁷⁸

In addition, although the Poor Law Commissioners had intended workhouse farms to serve solely for the instruction of children, many Boards of Guardians employed able-bodied adults on their farms to maximize profits. Of the 5,722 inmates employed on

⁷⁴ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 354. See also, Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 210.

⁷⁵ *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for the administering of the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 125, 130.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷⁷ See: *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 350.

⁷⁸ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 568.

workhouse farms in 1852, only 3,141 (54.9 per cent) were children.⁷⁹ The management of workhouse farms for profit by Boards of Guardians undermined the intention of the central Poor Law authorities that workhouse farms should function as agricultural schools for pauper boys.

By the early 1860s, most farms had been sold off due to the decline in the number of children in receipt of indoor relief. Based on the estimation by Poor Law authorities that the cultivation by spade of one acre required the labour of seven boys of 12 years of age, few rural workhouses especially contained enough boys of a sufficient age to cultivate and maintain their farms throughout the year.⁸⁰ For example, the Gort workhouse farm was closed in 1860 as eight of the twelve resident boys were under 12 and capable only of light weeding.⁸¹ Despite the shortage of boys, girls were not assigned to work on farms.⁸² Urban workhouses with consistently larger numbers of boys continued to operate farms into the late nineteenth century. In 1880, the North Dublin Guardians purchased an additional field of 20 acres ‘fifty minutes walking distance from the workhouse’ for ‘the raising of vegetables and potatoes’ by the boys.⁸³ Except in such large urban workhouses, the agricultural training of pauper children effectively ended with the parliamentary decisions, firstly, to disconnect all remaining workhouse agricultural schools from the National Education system in 1863 and, secondly, to withdraw all financial grants for the support of pauper agricultural training in 1868.⁸⁴ Despite the cessation of grants, agricultural instruction continued at workhouses which had sufficient numbers of boys for Boards of Guardians to justify the retention of a farm. These parliamentary decisions were condemned in the press and by National Education officials, but the basis upon which such condemnation rested – the continued belief that agricultural instruction was the most relevant form

⁷⁹ *Return from Unions in Ireland of workhouse farm and manufacturing accounts, 1852.*

⁸⁰ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, [674], H.C. 1852-53, xxiii, 567, p. 218.

⁸¹ Gort Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1860. GCCA, G01/12/30.

⁸² See: *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Jan. 1851.

⁸³ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1880. NAI, BG/78/A/74.

⁸⁴ *Irish Times*, 16 Jul. 1868.

of industrial training for pauper boys – failed to address the practical difficulties of agricultural instruction where there were insufficient numbers of pauper boys.⁸⁵

Instruction in trades was another form of industrial training provided for boys. During September 1853, 3,196 boys of between 9 and 15 received training in trades: 1,213 (38.0 per cent) were being trained as tailors; 835 (26.1 per cent) as weavers; 765 (23.9 per cent) as shoemakers; 195 (6.1 per cent) as bakers; 115 (3.6 per cent) as carpenters; 34 (1.1 per cent) as tinsmiths; and a further 39 (1.2 per cent) in unspecified trades.⁸⁶ Statistical returns on industrial training are unclear as to whether boys received training in trades instead of or in addition to agricultural instruction on farms. Moreover, some boys received training in multiple trades while resident in a workhouse, but the available evidence does not indicate whether training in different trades occurred simultaneously or successively.⁸⁷ Industrial training in trades was inconsistent between workhouses and over time as instruction was dependent either upon the hiring of an instructor by Boards of Guardians or, more commonly, upon the presence in a workhouse of an adult inmate who was skilled in a particular trade and able to teach pauper boys. Kavanagh reported that trades training was provided in most Leinster and Ulster workhouses but in only several Munster and Connaught workhouses, with tailoring taught in 73 workhouses, shoemaking in 51 workhouses, weaving in 38 workhouses, while carpentry and other trades were taught in relatively few workhouses.⁸⁸

The decline in the number of boys as inmates meant that training in trades was scaled down in workhouses with larger populations and ceased in those with smaller populations from the late 1850s onwards. Industrial training in trades was limited especially by the overall shortening of children's average period of workhouse residency as well as the widespread practice by Boards of Guardians of hiring out boys

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ *Return of industrial employment of juvenile inmates of workhouses in Ireland, September 1853*, [77], H.C. 1854, lv, 739.

⁸⁷ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, pp 670-1, 677-8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp 672-3.

at an early age. By 1861, few workhouses contained more than ten children who were over the age of 9 and thereby suitable for industrial training. An inspector reported that since ‘the children are so very small, ... any effective industrial training is impossible’.⁸⁹ In 1879, the Local Government Board responded to public criticisms about the absence of industrial training in trades at most workhouses by pointing out that ‘[i]t is generally believed that the number of children in the Workhouse schools capable of receiving practical industrial training is greater than it really is.’⁹⁰ Of the 483 boys who received some training in trades during the first six months of 1887, an inspector observed that most were ‘very young and not of an age to do much work.’⁹¹ The decline in the number of boys in the workhouses was the main reason behind the reduced provision of industrial training in trades, but its provision was curtailed also by an increasing level of disillusionment among some Poor Law officials regarding the effectiveness of such training as a preparation for children’s employment.

Criticism of instruction in trades centred on its perceived irrelevance and on the poor quality of work produced by boys who had received it. Boys involved in tailoring and shoemaking learnt few skills as their training was limited to the making and repair of workhouse clothing. The uniforms made by boys were ‘of the rudest description ... so peculiar as to deter theft’ with the clothing patched together from old fabrics and shoes constructed with leather nailed onto wooden soles.⁹² The weaving of blankets and canvases by boys on heavy wooden looms was ‘an exertion altogether beyond their age, strength, and diet’, while carpentry ‘does not extend beyond the making of coffins for the paupers, and small repairs through the Workhouse.’⁹³ In 1879, the Visiting Committee of the South Dublin Union doubted whether such limited

⁸⁹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 566.

⁹⁰ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p 52

⁹¹ *Fifteenth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 5124], H.C. 1887, xxxvii, 1, p. 94.

⁹² *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, pp 672-3

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 673.

training would prepare boys for employment as respectable tradesmen and they therefore suggested the cessation of all industrial training in trades:

It does not appear practicable to teach the boys any of the trades which are at present carried on in the house so as to enable them to obtain a livelihood. ... The class of work which is done in the house, although quite suitable to the wants of the establishment, is of such a character that they would not obtain employment in any respectable shop.⁹⁴

The effectiveness of industrial training in trades was increasingly questioned by Boards of Guardians as most boys left a workhouse before making any tangible progress in a craft. Interruptions to trades training meant that for many boys, '[t]o be able to thread a needle, plane a board, or "wax an end," is generally the height of their proficiency leaving many workhouses.'⁹⁵ Boards of Guardians who considered that the training of boys as tradesmen was 'purposeless' and a 'mere expensive nuisance' were less willing to maintain this form of industrial training in their workhouses.⁹⁶

More speculatively, the decline of industrial training in trades may have partly reflected a change in the predominant occupations available to the children of the labouring classes in Ireland. In the context of industrialisation in England during the early nineteenth century, Katrina Honeyman has argued that the artisan trades taught in workhouses were increasingly irrelevant to the skills required for industrial employments.⁹⁷ Training in trades may have held some continued relevance for children in the south and west of Ireland where the economy remained predominantly agricultural throughout the post-Famine era. Factories and mills were major employment destinations for poor children in north-east Ulster, however. In 1859, the School Committee of the Belfast workhouse reported that training in shoemaking and tailoring provided little benefit for the boys 'as many who are so employed have no

⁹⁴ *Irish Times*, 25 May 1883.

⁹⁵ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 175.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 175, 212.

⁹⁷ Katrina Honeyman, *Child workers in England, 1780-1820: parish apprentices and the making of the early industrial labour force* (Aldershot, 2007), pp 20-22.

intention of becoming tradesmen.’⁹⁸ Similarly, the high demand for mill workers in north-east Ulster meant that among girls in the Belfast workhouse, ‘all that can get employment prefer it to domestic service, especially as they draw their wages of from 3s. to 6s. per week, and are after six o’clock p.m. their own masters’.⁹⁹ These sources are significant as they imply that despite the prescriptive curriculum of workhouse industrial training, pauper children did not consider their employment options bound within it when alternative forms of employment were available.

V: Girls’ industrial training

Girls’ industrial training was directed mainly towards preparation for domestic service in the homes of farmers and the middle classes. There were few occupations available for women in post-Famine Ireland. Joanna Bourke has shown that there was an overall deterioration in female employment opportunities during the second half of the nineteenth century, a period that David Fitzpatrick has labelled as a ‘dismal period’ for women of the labouring classes.¹⁰⁰ The number of paid domestic female servants increased from 309,000 in 1861 to 392,100 (48 per cent of all employed women in Ireland) in 1881, but declined subsequently to 144,900 in 1911.¹⁰¹ Additionally, the number of women employed in agricultural labour fell from 27,000 in 1891 to 5,000 in 1911.¹⁰² By the early twentieth century, women’s opportunities for paid employment had been largely replaced by unpaid domestic labour within their own households. Domestic service remained the main form of industrial training for girls

⁹⁸ *Belfast News Letter*, 3 Aug. 1859.

⁹⁹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 572.

¹⁰⁰ Joanna Bourke, “‘The best of all home rulers’: the economic power of women in Ireland, 1880-1914”, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 18 (1991), p. 36; Joanna Bourke, ‘Women working: the domestic labour market in rural Ireland, 1890-1914’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 21 (1991), pp 479-99; Joanna Bourke, ‘Avoiding poverty. Strategies for women in rural Ireland’ in John Henderson and Richard Wall (eds), *Poor women and children in the European past* (London, 1994), pp 292-5, 299; Fitzpatrick, “‘A share of the honeycomb’”, p. 217.

¹⁰¹ Bourke, ‘Women working’, p. 485; Mona Hearn, ‘Life for domestic servants in Dublin, 1880-1920’ in Luddy and Murphy (eds), *Women surviving*, pp 148-79.

¹⁰² Bourke, “‘The best of all home rulers’”, p. 36

in workhouses and other institutions for the education of poor children, however.¹⁰³ The continued training of girls in domestic service was due partly to the gendered content of National Education in Ireland which ‘institutionalised the dominant ideology’ of the domestic role and function of women.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, Mona Hearn has pointed out that, despite the general reduction in domestic service positions, training in domestic service persisted within institutions as cheap household servants continued to be sought for by farmers and the urban lower middle classes, and also because such girls represented only a small fraction of the total number of female domestic servants.¹⁰⁵ Only around 400 girls who had been trained in domestic service in the workhouses and in similar institutions were hired each year.¹⁰⁶

In the immediate post-Famine years, the central Poor Law authorities articulated the necessity and appropriateness of training in domestic service for pauper girls and they also hoped that such training would raise the standard of domestic service in Ireland. Upon observing the training of girls in domestic service during his tour of Irish workhouses in 1853, John Forbes anticipated that:

young women so instructed and scattered throughout the land, will prove so many wellsprings of the economic virtues, and thus raise, both by example and precept, the standard of social and domestic life to a point much higher than it is now.¹⁰⁷

National Education officials recommended that ‘rough household work should occupy the first rank in the industrial training of the pauper girls’ as ‘domestic service must be mainly looked to as the destiny of most of these girls.’¹⁰⁸ During his inspection of workhouse schools, Kavanagh criticised Boards of Guardians for ‘a most serious

¹⁰³ See: Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, pp 120-8; Cooper, *The Protestant Orphan Society*, pp 151-62.

¹⁰⁴ Raftery and Parkes, *Female education in Ireland*, p. 40. See also: Walsh, ‘Images of women’, pp 73-87; McDermid, *The schooling of girls*, pp 32, 41-7; Hilary Marland, *Health and girlhood in Britain, 1874-1920* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp 3-9; Rutherford, ‘Girls and the formation of modern Ireland’, pp 38-9.

¹⁰⁵ Hearn, ‘Life for domestic servants’, pp 148-79.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Forbes, *Memorandums*, pp 277-8.

¹⁰⁸ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, p. 678.

oversight' in setting girls to industrial textile pursuits rather than to domestic duties.¹⁰⁹ Training in domestic service had negative repercussions for girls' literacy education due to the time-consuming nature of domestic chores. Some Boards of Guardians reduced the hours of girls' literary education on the premise that 'to elevate their minds too much, you render them unfit for farm servants.'¹¹⁰ In response to criticism that the girls of the Belfast workhouse were 'not being well acquainted with geography', one Guardian remarked that, 'he confessed that he would rather see them well acquainted with the geography of the wash-tub.'¹¹¹ While most pauper girls were assigned to domestic duties in the workhouse, the Poor Law Commissioners noted that 'the proportion of unemployed girls exceeds that of the boys' because '[t]he difficulties attendant on giving an industrial education to girls in Workhouses are greater' than those related to the instruction of boys in agriculture or trades.¹¹²

The scope of girls' training in domestic service was constrained by the nature of the household work required within a workhouse. Critics of the duties assigned to girls highlighted the dissimilarities between the types of domestic duties that were expected from a servant in a townhouse or farmer's household and the chores assigned to girls while in a workhouse. Girls' domestic duties in the workhouse consisted of cleaning floors and dormitories, washing clothing in the laundry, assisting with the cooking of meals, caring for infants, and the making and mending of children's clothing. One anonymous critic of girls' domestic training in the North Dublin workhouse argued:

It is sometimes asserted that they are made to do the work of the house; that they wash clothes, clean out wards, and so on. Let no one be imposed on by that. The washing of the pauper uniform does not go far towards initiating them into the mysteries of "making up linen;" and the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 190.

¹¹¹ *Belfast News Letter*, 21 Nov. 1866.

¹¹² *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 12.

sweeping out of dreary monotonous wards does not exactly qualify for housemaid's duty.¹¹³

An inspector also criticised the training of girls in workhouse kitchens because the cooking of inmates' meals in a 'vast steam machine' bore little relation to preparing food in a domestic kitchen.¹¹⁴ Employers of girls who were hired out as domestic servants often reported that the girls were 'in comical ignorance of the commonest matters of household economy' and thereby 'perfectly useless for all practical purposes.'¹¹⁵ Rather than in a form that was useful for employment in a farmer's or middle-class household, girls' training in domestic service was characterised by menial and unskilled duties relevant to the upkeep of a large institution.

The Poor Law authorities were aware that the workhouse environment was unsuitable for the training of girls as domestic servants. Attempts were made by some Boards of Guardians to replace the domestic chores that related to the upkeep of a workhouse institution with a more structured programme specific to household duties. At the Belfast workhouse, a kitchen with an open range and a small dining room were constructed to familiarise girls with the cooking facilities in a middle-class household.¹¹⁶ As a reward for good conduct, girls were sent to the kitchen for training in the cooking of 'plain food' by adult female inmates who had been cooks before their admission to the workhouse. The girls were taught in the use and cleaning of cooking utensils, as well as in the washing and ironing of clothes other than workhouse uniforms. Inspector reports from 1879 indicate that similar domestic setups had been established in other urban workhouses and that this change in the provision of domestic training 'has been followed by more cheerfulness in the discharge of it.'¹¹⁷ Poor provision for training in domestic service persisted in most workhouses, however. In

¹¹³ Anon., 'Begin at the beginning', pp 1185-6.

¹¹⁴ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, p. 396.

¹¹⁵ Anon., 'Begin at the beginning', p. 1186; *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 186; O'Connell, 'A plea for the poor hearth', p. 159.

¹¹⁶ *Belfast News Letter*, 21 Nov. 1866.

¹¹⁷ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 53.

1908, after several aborted efforts, the members of a Ladies Boarding Out Committee felt themselves compelled to establish a domestic training institution in Dublin for workhouse girls from across Ireland for the purpose of ‘lifting them to the ranks of the skilled worker ... instead of leaving them as unskilled drudges.’¹¹⁸

Some provision was made for the training of girls in textile production and repair to improve their domestic service skills and facilitate their employment into clothing shops. During the early 1850s, training in textile work was on an industrial scale as large numbers of pauper girls allowed for an improved economy of scale in the production of items for the profit of individual Unions. In September 1853, there were 9,166 girls between 9 and 15 years of age engaged in textile production who accounted for 64.2 per cent of the 14,273 girls of that age in the workhouses.¹¹⁹ Girls involved in textile work were assigned to one of three grades of proficiency according to their skill: the ability to sew thread; the ability to put together a simple garment such as a shirt or frock; and the ability to produce fine embroidery.¹²⁰ Kavanagh reported that the girls were able to manufacture ‘extremely beautiful specimens’ of crochet work and fine embroidery of sewed muslin that Board of Guardians sold for considerable profit.¹²¹ The Poor Law Commissioners promoted ‘the instruction of this class in various methods of embroidery and ornamental work on light fabrics for which there appears to be a great demand’ as it had ‘enabled many young women so instructed to leave the Workhouses and earn their own subsistence.’¹²² The employment of thousands of girls in textile production exemplified the overlap between the exploitation by Boards of Guardians of pauper children’s labour for profit and the provision of industrial training for girls during the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine.

¹¹⁸ *Thirty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 5319], H.C. 1910, xl, 1, pp 143-4.

¹¹⁹ *Return of industrial employment of juvenile inmates of workhouses in Ireland, September 1853*.

¹²⁰ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, pp 677-8.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp 678-9.

¹²² *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 12.

The training of pauper girls in fine embroidery was controversial, however. Advocates for teaching girls in sewed muslin work argued that it was ‘a great source of employment for females ... scattered through all the counties of Ulster and some localities of the other provinces’, that it enabled women to earn up to 6s. per week in their own homes, and that it would provide girls with skills to work in textile factories.¹²³ Such was the value of sewed muslin that several girls in the Antrim workhouse attempted to smuggle their embroidery work out with them upon their discharge.¹²⁴ Yet, the National Education authorities viewed industrial training in fine embroidery work as irrelevant for a domestic servant. Kavanagh argued that ‘[a] girl might work a collar exquisitely, or embroider a coronet for a duchess’ but such abilities were useless if she were ‘unable to wash and make up a shirt, dress a baby, cook a beefsteak, or lay a tradesman’s dinner table.’¹²⁵ By the early 1860s, the training of girls in textile production for factory employment had largely ceased as the number of girls in workhouses had declined considerably. Girls continued to learn to sew and knit on a small scale for the repair of clothing for workhouse inmates and as part of their preparation for employment as domestic servants.

VI: Conclusion

Children’s education in the workhouse school was focused upon their industrial training as preparation for employment. Through a desire by Boards of Guardians to maximise the financial return of pauper labour, however, children in many workhouses were set to the same arduous and unskilled labour tasks as able-bodied adults during the late-1840s and early-1850s. Such practices were widely criticised as cruel, particularly in the case of capstan mills, and as contravening the principle that pauper children were blameless of their destitution and therefore should not have been treated

¹²³ Forbes, *Memorandums*, p. 21; Alexander Thom, *Statistics of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1855 (Dublin, 1855), p. 89.

¹²⁴ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1861. PRONI, BG/1/A/10.

¹²⁵ *Twentieth annual report of the commissioners for National Education in Ireland*, p. 678.

similarly to adults. Following the Great Famine, pauper children were popularly perceived of as a cheap labour resource with which to stimulate industrial development. Additionally, the promotion of industrial training over literacy education reflected the views of many Poor Law and National Education officials that such training was more relevant than improvements in literacy for the future employment prospects of children in the workhouse.

The industrial training curriculum was narrow and prescriptive according to the expected future employments of boys and girls of the labouring classes in post-Famine Ireland. Boys were to receive training in agricultural labour and trades while girls were to be given experience in domestic service. Although some Boards of Guardians acquired land for farms, most had relinquished their farms by the 1860s as the number of boys in receipt of relief had declined. Moreover, boys' agricultural training was undermined by an inadequate number of qualified instructors. Girls were tasked with menial domestic duties around the workhouse institution which some officials and commentators argued little reflected the types of household duties that were required of domestic servants in the homes of the middle classes. The limited provision of industrial training for pauper children did not correlate with the rhetoric that had been used by the Poor Law authorities regarding the importance of such industrial training. The childhood of pauper children was directed from a young age towards their adult employments as labourers and servants, but the poor standard of industrial training received by many children left them ill-prepared by the time of their discharge or hiring out from the workhouse.

Chapter Six

Hiring out and assisted emigration

I: Introduction

The industrial training received by children in the workhouse schools was intended by the Poor Law authorities to culminate in the hiring out of the children to local employers or their assisted emigration to British colonial territories. Children's industrial training and hiring out under the Irish Poor Law together comprised a single process by which officials expected that the children would be removed permanently from the workhouses as independent labourers and thereby lifted from the cycle of hereditary pauperism. In line with the narrow curriculum of industrial training received by children in the workhouses, hired out children were generally employed as agricultural labourers and as domestic servants, but some boys were employed in industrial occupations or in the military. Although their employment under the hiring out system was an integral part of many children's experience of a workhouse childhood, it is the area of Poor Law policy towards children that has been least explored by historians.

This chapter shows that the hiring out system was characterised by the economic exploitation of children as well as by their neglect and physical mistreatment at the hands of their employers. Moreover, rather than facilitating children's permanent removal from the workhouses as independent labourers, children were usually hired out on short-term contracts on low or non-existent wages and regularly returned to the workhouses at the ends of their employments. Boards of Guardians hired out children at young ages to the detriment of the children's literacy education and industrial training, and the failure to provide an adequate level of inspection for hired out children reportedly led to much abuse. Similar practices prevailed in the assisted emigration of children and their employment in colonial territories. This chapter reveals that while some reform of the employment of children occurred with

the appointment of Lady Inspectors in 1902, the hiring out system remained the most abusive aspect of a workhouse childhood.

II: Children's employment and hiring out

The hiring out of pauper children has not been examined in the historiography about poor relief in Ireland. Consequently, much of our understanding about the employment of children from institutional care is derived from scholarly studies on parish apprenticeships and the factory employment of children in receipt of statutory poor relief under the Old Poor Law in England.¹ These studies have shown the system of parish apprenticeship led to a close integration between institutional poor relief and the child labour market. As Katrina Honeyman has argued, 'much employment for children was situated at the interface of the Poor Law and the industrial labour market' which meant that 'the parish apprentice became an integral part of the early industrial labour force.'² This close integration was mutually beneficial to both relief authorities and employers as the hiring of children from institutions that were 'overburdened with needy children' into industries which had a high demand for child labourers 'eased pressures on both.'³ In this context, an examination of the hiring out of children from the workhouses of the Irish Poor Law is crucial for our understanding of the extent and economic significance of child labour in Ireland.

Most of the institutions that were established for the welfare of poor children in Ireland during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries operated systems of hiring out to local employers. In her study of industrial schools that were established by religious orders in Ireland from 1868 onwards, Jane Barnes has argued that the 'licensing

¹ See: Crompton, *Workhouse children*, pp 221-4; Katrina Honeyman, 'Compulsion, compassion and consent: parish apprenticeship in early-nineteenth-century England' in Goose and Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and child labour in industrial England*, pp 71-95; Humphries, *Childhood and child labour*, pp 256-305; Alys Levene, 'Charity apprenticeship and social capital in eighteenth-century England' in Goose and Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and child labour in industrial England*, pp 45-69.

² Honeyman, *Child workers in England*, p. 15.

³ Ibid.

system' under which industrial school children were licensed as labourers to local employers effected 'a gradual assimilation of the child into society'.⁴ Yet, as Barnes has shown, only around half of the children who attended industrial schools between 1868 and 1908 were hired out to employment because school managers were reluctant to forfeit government funding for the maintenance of the children in their institutions.⁵ Orphan societies also arranged for the training and employment of the children under their care. In a recent study, Cooper has detailed the system of apprenticeship that was run by the Protestant Orphan Society in Ireland and under which much mistreatment and abuse was alleged to have occurred due to the limited provision made for the inspection and supervision of the children while at employment.⁶ Compared with the employment of children from industrial schools and philanthropic societies, the records pertaining to the hiring out system of the Irish Poor Law indicate that it was much more extensive in terms of its geographical reach, the numbers of children employed, and its significance for the child labour market. This system has been under-researched, however. The hiring out of children at the end of a period of industrial training has been referred to only briefly in local studies concerning the care of children in the workhouses of North Dublin, Tipperary, and Cork.⁷ More systematically, Georgina Laragy has shown that the hiring out system under the Poor Law in Northern Ireland was an important but declining source of labour for agriculture and industry until the Second World War.⁸ There remains therefore a need to examine the development and operation of the hiring out system during the post-Famine era.

During the early 1850s, with large numbers of children in the workhouses who had been orphaned or abandoned in the Great Famine, many Boards of Guardians

⁴ Barnes, *Irish industrial schools*, p. 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 79-84.

⁶ Cooper, *The Protestant Orphan Society*, pp 151-65, 170.

⁷ Robins, *The lost children*, pp 233-43; Lanigan, 'Tipperary workhouse children and the Famine', pp 65-6; O'Mahony, *Cork's Poor Law palace*, pp 119, 128-30.

⁸ Georgina Laragy, "For whose benefit these burdens must be taken": children, employment, and training in Northern Ireland, 1921-1939', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 9 (2016), pp 277-93.

attempted to hire out as many children as quickly as possible. Boards of Guardians who had incurred substantial debts during the Great Famine were motivated to hire out children in this fashion to reduce the numbers of children and the costs of their maintenance in the workhouses. In addition, just as the assignment of labour tasks to children appears to have been understood by Boards of Guardians during this period as synonymous with the provision of industrial training, some Guardians may have viewed the actual employment of children in industry as having been either equal or superior to a period of industrial training.⁹ Indeed, in the context of the dearth of labourers after the Great Famine, Boards of Guardians saw little reason to delay the employment of children, and by extension the children's expected independence as labourers, for the sake of a seemingly redundant period of industrial training in a workhouse.

Some Boards of Guardians actively advertised the availability of the children in their workhouses as a ready source of cheap labour for the expected expansion of industrial manufacturing in Ireland in the years that immediately followed the Great Famine. For example, at a meeting of the Board of Irish Manufacturers and Industry in February 1851, the South Dublin Board of Guardians exhibited a selection of the textile products that had been produced by the children in the workhouse for the profit of the South Dublin Union. The products on display included 'samplers of the most beautiful character' of embroidery, lace gloves and stockings, window curtains, and other textile works. To cheers from the audience, one of the Guardians declared that 'those things were made by children of nine, ten, and twelve years of age' and, to encourage the attendant manufacturers to hire the children into their textile factories, he asked 'will it be tolerated that hundreds of thousands of such children shall be kept idle and rotting in the poorhouses of Ireland?'¹⁰ Through such employment, the Guardians argued further, the children would learn industrial skills and there would be a stimulation of industry across the country. Ulster manufacturers sought and

⁹ See: Chapter Five, pp 165-71.

¹⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Feb. 1851.

employed hundreds of children from workhouses in all parts of Ireland. In December 1852, for instance, ‘Messrs. McReynolds and Morgan’, a weaving company in Belfast, issued a circular to all Boards of Guardians in which they stated that, ‘they have employment for 300 or 500 weaving boys should the Irish unions have that number to supply the demands.’¹¹ The wages offered by the company progressed from 4*d.* per day during the boys’ first month to 10*d.* per day by their seventh month, but the advert added that if a boy was found incompetent he was to be returned to his workhouse of origin. These and similar arrangements appeared mutually beneficial for Boards of Guardians who wanted to reduce the costs of children’s maintenance in the workhouses and for manufacturers who desired a source of cheap industrial labour.

The Poor Law Commissioners were opposed to the employment of children into factories because it led to exploitation and abuse of the children and of the poor relief system itself. In 1853, the Commissioners communicated to Boards of Guardians their concerns that since the agreements between Guardians and manufacturers included no considerations for how the children would be accommodated or treated by their employers in a factory environment, the children were placed at risk of abuse or moral corruption:

no security is offered for providing that domestic protection of the boys, ... which is usually provided in individual cases of apprenticeships, and which would be so necessary to young persons of either sex in a large town like Belfast.¹²

Additionally, the Commissioners were critical of arrangements that did not provide for the training and employment of children in the long-term. The Commissioners argued that the practice by manufacturers of hiring children for a matter of months and then returning them to their workhouses until requested again was tantamount to the exploitation of the Poor Law as a reservoir of cheap casual labour ‘enjoyed by them at the expense of a public fund’ and which would undercut the wages of independent

¹¹ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1852. NAI, BG/78/A/19.

¹² *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 79.

labourers.¹³ The opposition of the Poor Law Commissioners highlighted a difference of opinion between them and many Boards of Guardians about the most effective and efficient means to facilitate children's employment as independent labourers and thereby reduce the costs of children's maintenance in the workhouses. Whereas Boards of Guardians generally viewed the immediate employment of children as the fastest route to children's independence, the Commissioners favoured a period of industrial training to suitably prepare children for employment and thereby better facilitate their permanent removal from the workhouses.

From the mid-1850s, the vast majority of children were hired out either as agricultural labourers or as domestic servants. This change away from manufacturing employments was due to the Poor Law Commissioners' disapproval of the employment of children in factories, the limited extent of industrialisation in Ireland outside of north-east Ulster, and the decline of industrial textile work in the workhouses in favour of boys' agricultural instruction and the tasking of domestic duties to girls. However, the Belfast Board of Guardians continued to hire out children into factories in the city.¹⁴ In the absence of national statistical returns relating to hired-out children, the total number of children who were hired out during the post-Famine era remains unknown, but the ad-hoc nature of the hiring out records kept by some Boards of Guardians give an indication of the number of children hired out in certain localities. The minute books of the Belfast Board of Guardians record that 102 children (69 girls and 33 boys) were hired out between April 1850 and March 1851, and 60 children (41 girls, 8 boys, and 11 with their gender unrecorded) were hired out between March and December 1871.¹⁵ A report about hired out children from the South Dublin workhouse stated that 200 children (165 girls and 135 boys) were

¹³ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁴ For example, in March 1871, 32 boys of the Belfast workhouse were contracted out to mill work at the 'Mossley mill'. Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34.

¹⁵ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/35.

employed between June 1858 and March 1861.¹⁶ The smaller scale of hiring out from rural workhouses which had fewer inmates is shown in the records of the Thurles Board of Guardians: eight children (five girls and three boys) were hired-out between July 1860 and August 1861; seven children (three girls and four boys) from July 1871 to December 1871; and ten children (two girls, eight boys, and three with their gender unrecorded) from July 1880 to October 1881.¹⁷ These statistics suggest that more girls were hired-out than boys, but this may have simply reflected the greater numbers of girls in the populations of most workhouses rather than necessarily revealing a greater demand for the employment of girls than boys.

Hiring out should be conceptualised as a contracted term of employment rather than as an apprenticeship. Under the hiring out system, children were contracted directly to local employers for a fixed-term of usually between six months and one year. These contracts between employers and children, or between employers and Boards of Guardians on behalf of the children, included an agreement on the wages for the children and whether the children were to attend school or receive some form of training. Details of hiring out arrangements were recorded to varying extents in the minute books of Boards of Guardians. By the twentieth century, however, hiring out contracts had been formalised and standardised by the Local Government Board under the Pauper Children (Ireland) Acts of 1898 and 1902. Figures 9 and 10 are the hiring contracts relating to two children from the Tipperary workhouse in May 1915. Figure 9 is the contract for Alice Carey, age 12 years, who was hired as a farm servant by Patrick Ryan, a farmer with two acres, for a term of 12 months at wages of 25s. per quarter. Figure 10 shows that Michael Hayes, age 13 years, was hired as an agricultural labourer by John Guinan, a farmer of 30 acres, for a term of 12 months at wages of 35s. per quarter. These contracts, issued during the years of greatest scrutiny

¹⁶ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 522-4.

¹⁷ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1860. TS, BG/151/A/32; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/33; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/34.

Figure 9: Hiring out contract of Alice Carey, Tipperary Union, 11th May 1915

PAUPER CHILDREN ACTS, &c. **FORM No. 2.**

24th September, 1906.

Tipperary UNION.

Application for a Servant, and Agreement.

Name of Child Alice Carey Religion R.C.
 Age 12 Wages 2.5/- per Quarter
 I, Patrick Ryan of Moherough, Anasanty
 in the County of Tipperary (where I have resided for the last
3 years), in the occupation of 2 Acres of land, and
 of the R.C. Religion, and by Trade or Occupation a Farmer
 hereby agree with the Board of Guardians of the Tipperary
 Union, in the County Tipperary as to the hiring of
 a girl named Alice Carey and I propose
 to keep the said Alice Carey in my employment for at least one
 years. I undertake that I will take proper care of the said Alice Carey
 and teach or cause her to be taught the Trade or Calling of a Farmer
 to pay her wages during the continuance of the agreement, at the rate of £ 6
 a year.

And I hereby agree to allow the relieving officer or any other person from time to
 time to be nominated for that purpose by the Guardians or any Inspector of the Local
 Government Board to see and to inspect the said Alice Carey
 and to inspect and examine into the provision made by me for lodging and other treatment,
 and when required so to do to produce the said Alice Carey
 for inspection for the purposes aforesaid. I agree to be under a penalty of two pounds
 sterling, to be paid to the Board of Guardians of Tipperary
 Union, for violating any of the above undertakings.

Given under my hand this 11 day of May One Thousand
 Nine Hundred and fifteen

Signed by the said Patrick Ryan

In the presence of Ed Quirk

Denis W. Donovan Witness.
Brenscha, Tipperary Address.
 Agreed to

Chairman of Board.

Clerk of the Union.

Local Boards' Supply Houses.
 DOLLARD, DUBLIN. C 19153. 2

Source: Tipperary Board of Guardians Minute Book of Boarded and Hired Out Children,
 Nov. 1912 – Oct. 1915. TS, BG/152/A1/1

Figure 10: Hiring out contract of Michael Hayes, Tipperary Union, 18th May 1915

PAUPER CHILDREN ACTS, &c. **FORM No. 2.**

24th September, 1906. **UNION.**

Application for a Servant, and Agreement.

Name of Child Michael Hayes Religion R.C.

Age 13 Years Wages Twenty Five Shillings

I, John Guinan of Reddaneewell

in the County of Tipperary (where I have resided for the last Eight years), in the occupation of Curry Cook Acres of land, and of the R.C. Religion, and by Trade or Occupation a Farmer, hereby agree with the Board of Guardians of the Tipperary Union, in the County Tipperary as to the hiring of a boy named Michael Hayes and I propose to keep the said Michael Hayes in my employment for at least one year. I undertake that I will take proper care of the said Michael Hayes and teach or cause him to be taught the Trade or Calling of agricultural labour to pay his wages during the continuance of the agreement, at the rate of Twenty Five Shillings per Quarter to be subsequently increased to 14 shillings quarterly.

And I hereby agree to allow the relieving officer or any other person from time to time to be nominated for that purpose by the Guardians or any Inspector of the Local Government Board to see and to inspect the said Michael Hayes and to inspect and examine into the provision made by me for lodging and other treatment, and when required so to do to produce the said Michael Hayes for inspection for the purposes aforesaid. I agree to be under a penalty of two pounds sterling, to be paid to the Board of Guardians of Tipperary Union, for violating any of the above undertakings.

Given under my hand this 18th day of May One Thousand Nine Hundred and Fifteen

Signed by the said John Guinan

In the presence of Patrick Harrington Witness.

Tipperary Address.

Agreed to Keef Lubbers Chairman of Board.

Clerk of the Union.

Local Boards' Supply House.
DOLLARD, DUBLIN C 19153. C

Source: Tipperary Board of Guardians Minute Book of Boarded and Hired Out Children,
Nov. 1912 – Oct. 1915. TS, BG/152/A1/1

and enforcement of children's treatment and wages by the Local Government Board Lady Inspectors, included provisions for the inspection of the children's lodgings, and stipulated that the employers would arrange training for the children in the occupations to which they hired. In contrast to a system of apprenticeship, these hiring out contracts neither bound children to their employers for multiple years nor paid a premium to employers for hiring the children.

The Poor Law Commissioners opposed a system of apprenticeship which they believed would place the workhouse child in a more favourable position than other children of the labouring classes. In 1861, Alfred Power, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner, argued before a parliamentary select committee that the payment of apprenticeship premiums to employers 'would be doing too much' as it 'would be doing that for those children which poor people cannot afford to do for their own children.'¹⁸ The opposition of the Commissioners to an official apprenticeship system did not preclude individual Guardians and philanthropists from establishing apprenticeship societies that were separate from the Poor Law. In 1857, several members of the Cork Board of Guardians as well as local philanthropists established the 'Benevolent Apprentices Society' which was funded from charitable subscriptions and which indentured 35 boys as apprentices to employers who were paid £1 per year to undertake training of the boys.¹⁹ The society stated its purpose was as a patronage society for 'apprenticing these children, while they were still innocent, and of becoming their guardians for a few years, till their acquaintance with the world might enable them to act for themselves.'²⁰ The following year, the society began to apprentice girls into domestic service positions with oversight from a voluntary committee of women. The society argued that these apprenticeships gave more

¹⁸ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 56.

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the Cork Benevolent Apprenticing Society, see, O'Mahoney, *Cork's Poor Law palace*, pp 132-5.

²⁰ Anon., 'First annual report of the Benevolent Apprenticing Society, Cork, read by Mr. R. J. O'Shaughnessy', *The Irish Quarterly Review*, 8 (1858), p. 27; O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 71.

protection to the children because of oversight by the children's benefactors, but it was also reported to the society that their difficulties in sourcing sufficient apprenticeship positions were due to the preference among employers for the short-term wage for labour contracts offered under the Poor Law and which involved little supervision by officials.²¹

Some boys were encouraged to enlist into the army or navy although the extent to which this occurred likely depended greatly upon the political outlook of individual Boards of Guardians. Several Poor Law officials and conservative newspapers argued that the military had the right to enlist workhouse boys, 'who may be considered the children of the State', as their maintenance and education had been paid for from public funds.²² As the *Irish Times* asked in 1859, '[d]oes this great benefit of State maintenance and education constitute no claim whatever on the part of the nation to the services of this body; ... it would be paradoxical to deny this.'²³ In contrast, nationalist Guardians and press were generally opposed to the enlistment of boys into the military, however. In 1878, during a debate among the Cork Board of Guardians about a proposal to enlist boys into the navy, one nationalist Guardian argued against the proposal and stated, 'I don't see why they should be sent out of the country at all.'²⁴ At urban workhouses, drill and other military exercises were added to boys' industrial training in order to prepare them for enlistment and also to improve discipline in the schools.²⁵ The Belfast Guardians were particularly supportive of the military training of boys. During the Second Boer War, the Board installed a flagstaff with naval flags in the yard, appointed pauper ex-soldiers to drill boys in military manoeuvres, and issued boys with dummy rifles.²⁶ Several newspapers reported that workhouse boys

²¹ Anon., 'Benevolent Apprenticing Society', p. 27.

²² *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, p. 366.

²³ *Irish Times*, 17 Sep. 1859.

²⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 6 Sep. 1878.

²⁵ See: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1854. NAI, BG/78/A/24; *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 233; *Freeman's Journal*, 1 Jul. 1870.

²⁶ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1850. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; *Belfast News Letter*, 16 Apr. 1862; *Belfast News Letter*, 11 Apr. 1900.

were readily accepted into army regiments, ‘thanks to the sound education and habits of discipline which they have received’, although the same newspapers had criticised the results of pauper education in the workhouses.²⁷

The military was wary of accepting boys from the workhouses in every instance, however. In 1881, the Cork Board of Guardians sent 13 boys to the docks and on board a navy ship to seek enlistment, but the naval authorities refused to accept them. The Admiralty argued that the boys were fit for service but were rejected because they did not wish to encourage Boards of Guardians to view the navy as a convenient means to offload boys from their workhouses:

the Admiralty thought it right to exercise their discretion, and refuse the boys. If these boys had been entered under those circumstances, any board of guardians in the three kingdoms would be sending boys in large numbers on board her Majesty’s ships in order, no doubt, to save the rates.²⁸

The weight of evidence suggests that military enlistment accounted for only a relatively small proportion of boys employed from Irish workhouses. The Poor Law authorities took the view that agricultural labour was the most suitable employment for pauper boys and which ‘holds out the best prospect of their reclamation.’²⁹

III: Supervision and abuse

Compared to apprenticeship, the hiring out system functioned as a more casual form of employment. The Poor Law authorities generally approved of the hiring out system as it eased the removal of children from the workhouses and it resembled how the children of the labouring classes were employed. However, some social commentators and poor relief officials criticised Boards of Guardians for the employment of children from a young age and for the inadequate amount of supervision to prevent

²⁷ See: *Irish Times*, 27 Jul. 1864; *Freeman’s Journal*, 10 Oct. 1871.

²⁸ *Freeman’s Journal*, 21 Jan. 1881.

²⁹ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, p. 367.

mistreatment. The age at which children were hired out was at the discretion of Boards of Guardians and therefore varied between localities according to the relative demand for labour and the different customary ages at which the children of the local labouring classes were normally employed.³⁰ Children were usually hired out from 12 years of age, but many were hired at 10 and some were as young as 8. In Ulster, where demand for labour was highest, few workhouses contained any children over 12 as they had been hired out.³¹ In 1852, the Ballymena Guardians informed the Board of Irish Manufacturers that they had no boys of 12, ‘as when they approach that age they are immediately hired out to manufacturers in the country, the demand for such being much greater than what the Guardians can meet.’³² In Donegal, children were hired out at 10 because the children of the local labouring classes ‘have to earn their livelihood in this manner’ and Boards of Guardians therefore argued that ‘they do not see why the workhouse children should be treated differently.’³³ Under the Pauper Children (Ireland) Act of 1898, a minimum age of 12 was set for the hiring out of children but the reports from Lady Inspectors contain evidence that some Boards of Guardians continued to hire out children from a much earlier age.³⁴

The hiring out of children from a young age was criticised by some Poor Law officials as detrimental to children’s education. Officers who were responsible for children’s education occasionally complained to their Board of Guardians that their hiring out policies contributed to a low standard of literacy among the children. For example, in 1857, the Antrim workhouse Presbyterian chaplain stated that the hiring out of boys at 8 ‘is an evil I have long deplored’ as he thought ‘they should possess a certain amount of secular knowledge before leaving the Establishment – for if they do

³⁰ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 74.

³¹ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, p. 396.

³² Ballymena Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1852. PRONI, BG/4/A/4.

³³ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 75.

³⁴ See: *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 3102], H.C. 1906, xxxvi, 495, p. 166; *Thirty-seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 4810], H.C. 1909, xxx, 1, pp 20-1; *Thirty-ninth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 5847], H.C. 1911, xxxiii, 1, p. 34.

not receive an education before leaving where will they receive it?’³⁵ At workhouse schools from which most children under 12 were hired out, standards of literacy were lowered due to the young ages of the remaining pupils ‘from whom so much cannot be expected’.³⁶ In the context of the availability of National Education for the children of the labouring classes, some middle-class commentators queried whether the hiring out of pauper children at young ages accurately reflected how the children of the labouring classes were employed. When a 10 year old boy was hired out from the Cavan workhouse in 1860, the *Anglo-Celt* newspaper claimed that local children were not employed at that age and asked ‘[i]s ten years of age a period of life, in the annals of the poor in which education is conceived to be completed and sufficient?’³⁷ By 1895, the Local Government Board encouraged Boards of Guardians to keep boys and girls in the workhouse schools until the ages of 14 and 15 respectively on the basis that ‘the education which children receive during the latter years of their school life is all important to them’ as it was argued that such education ‘may fit them for positions which they could not hope to occupy if their education was interrupted at an earlier period.’³⁸

Poor Law officials who favoured the hiring out of children at a young age argued that this was necessary to instil children with habits of labour and to protect them from moral contamination in the adult wards of a workhouse. In 1853, the position of the Poor Law Commissioners was that children had to be hired out no later than 13, for ‘[i]f you keep a boy until the age of 16 he will rarely turn out well’ as ‘a youth accustomed to a routine, and not forced to exert himself, will not submit to the new restraints, but ‘if you graft him into society at 12 or 13, having given him some previous habits of industry, in the majority of cases the result will be successful.’³⁹

³⁵ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1857. PRONI, BG/1/A/6. See also: *Belfast News Letter*, 10 Nov. 1884.

³⁶ For example, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/57.

³⁷ *Anglo-Celt*, 10 Nov. 1860.

³⁸ *Twenty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 7818], H.C. 1895, liii, 1, p. 79.

³⁹ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, p. 396. See also: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/69.

Concerning the alleged risk posed to children's morality by a later age of hiring out, a North Dublin schoolmistress was reportedly worried about the prospects of girls of ages 14 and 15 in her class, 'for they were of an age to go into the adult ward of which she spoke with horror, saying that it was great pity she could get no places for them.'⁴⁰ The perceived importance of hiring out children from an early age was partly because it was the main method by which the Poor Law authorities were able to remove orphaned and abandoned children from the workhouses before the extension of boarding out to older children in the late nineteenth century. Children who had been admitted with parents for a relatively long length of stay of over a month were also hired out, but children admitted as casuals or ins-and-outs were not as they had not received enough industrial training under the supervision of the schoolteachers. Until the early twentieth century, the limited and slow take-up of the boarding out system by rural Boards of Guardians was key to the persistent hiring out of children under 12 as a way to remove such children from these workhouses.⁴¹

Children had little influence over the terms of their contracts. In 1853, the Poor Law Commissioners had stipulated that a child was supposed to have entered into a hiring out contract on his or her own free will and Boards of Guardians were not permitted to sign an employment contract on behalf of a child.⁴² The North Dublin workhouse master described how this procedure operated in the hiring of girls:

when parties apply for servants, word is sent to the girls, ... they are brought down to the lodge, the people applying make their own selection, they and the girls make their own terms; we never interfere.⁴³

In many instances, however, children had no say in either the selection of their employers or about the terms of their contracts. Denis O'Connor, a Cork workhouse

⁴⁰ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 218.

⁴¹ See: Chapter Eight, pp 278-80.

⁴² *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 79.

⁴³ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 236-7.

Medical Officer, stated that, 'it has been too much the habit hitherto to hand over both boys and young females to any one that applied for them.'⁴⁴ In 1894, inspectors for the Local Government Board found that instead of formal written contracts of employment that were agreed between children and their employers, children in many Poor Law Unions were hired out under verbal agreements that were entered into by Boards of Guardians on behalf of the children.⁴⁵ The limited input afforded to children in the agreement of hiring out contracts was epitomised by the treatment of children who either attempted to negotiate their contracts or refused to accept an employment altogether. At the Thurles workhouse in 1861, Anne Jordan, aged 15 years, 'refused to go to service' on the terms offered to her, and Michael Maher, aged 12 years, refused to accept wages of 3s. 6d. per quarter and asked for 6s. instead.⁴⁶ As punishment for asking for higher wages, and perhaps as a warning to other children, the Thurles Guardians ordered that both children were to be 'turned out of the house'.⁴⁷ In 1857, one commentator described the compelling of children to enter low paid contracts as 'a species of slavery.'⁴⁸

The lack of interest taken by Boards of Guardians in the selection of suitable and respectable employers for children was a further criticism levelled at the hiring out system. During the nineteenth century, the offer of hiring out contracts that demanded only low wages and little or no inspection was alleged by commentators to have resulted in the selection of a low standard of employer which thereby raised the risk of the mistreatment of children. In 1859, an anonymous commentator on the hiring out system claimed that because of the favourable contracts available to employers:

⁴⁴ O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 65.

⁴⁵ *Twenty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 81.

⁴⁶ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/33; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/34.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 166. See also: Hancock, 'The workhouse as a mode of relief', p. 87.

[t]he people who come to take out poorhouse children, are low struggling roomkeepers who cannot pay servant's wages, and want a little drudge, who for 'her bit', no better generally than pauper's fare, is expected to slave, and trudge, and scrub.⁴⁹

The Belfast Board of Guardians had introduced some safeguards against the selection of undesirable employers including the requirement for employers to provide a certificate of character signed by a clergyman and that all contracts were to be approved by multiple workhouse officers.⁵⁰ However, these changes were likely made after instances of neglect or abuse had already occurred.

In the absence of reform, the selection of exploitative employers continued into late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1895, the Local Government Board advised Boards of Guardians that 'something more should be required from the employer than a mere testimonial of respectability', and they repeated the claim that contracts with low wages and limited supervision attracted a low class of employer:

[i]t frequently happens that the class of persons who apply to the Guardians for servants are those who, owing to their condition of life, are unable to pay the current rate of wages, or to obtain servants elsewhere.⁵¹

Moreover, in their annual reports, the Lady Inspectors of hired out children detailed that children were generally hired as 'the servants of servants' and were either paid low wages 'which would not pay for the wear and tear of clothing' or no wages at all.⁵²

⁴⁹ Anon., 'Begin at the beginning', p. 1186.

⁵⁰ See: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1850. PRONI, BG/7/A/10; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/34.

⁵¹ *Twenty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 80.

⁵² *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 2655], H.C. 1905, xxxiii, 1, p. 83. For examples of the payment of low wages and the non-payment of wages, see: *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 236-7; *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 77-8; *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 166; *Thirty-fifth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 3682], H.C. 1907, xxviii, 1, p. 155; *Thirty-sixth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 4243], H.C. 1908, xxxi, 1, p. 150; *Forty-second annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 19; *Forty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 8016], H.C. 1914-16, xxv, 341, p. 14; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1910. NAI, BG/78/A/130; Tipperary Board

Marie Dickie, a Lady Inspector, suggested that the seeming ambivalence of Boards of Guardians, ‘those in position of parents’, towards the payment and treatment of hired out children resulted in employers having little respect for the children who, in turn:

instead of being imbued with an idea that he is earning his own living with a view to securing his future independence, sees no result from his labour, and quickly loses any aspiration and deteriorates into a mere drudge.⁵³

Boards of Guardians who hired out children on low wages and to a low standard of employer were thus portrayed as undermining the purpose of the hiring out system which was to instil children with habits of industry and provide them the means to become independent labourers.

Boards of Guardians exercised limited supervision over the treatment of hired out children once they left the workhouse for employment.⁵⁴ In most Poor Law Unions, the Relieving Officer paid monthly visits to hired-out children, but these inspections rarely involved detailed inquiry into the children’s treatment.⁵⁵ The Poor Law authorities had little knowledge of the subsequent fate of hired out children once they entered employment as many Boards of Guardians considered that their responsibilities ceased when the children left the workhouse under an employment contract.⁵⁶ Supervision was limited also because Boards of Guardians were concerned that frequent inspections might deter persons from employing pauper children as few employers were allegedly ‘willing to suffer, without resenting it, too much intrusion of this kind into their domestic affairs.’⁵⁷ Furthermore, some children were hired out to Poor Law Guardians themselves which placed Relieving Officers in the

of Guardians Minute Book of Boarded and Hired Out Children, Nov. 1912 – Oct. 1915. TS, BG/152/AI/1.

⁵³ *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 162.

⁵⁴ See: *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 83; *Thirty-seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Moore, *Children in Irish workhouses*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ See: *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 75; *Twenty-third annual report of the Local Government Board*, pp 79-80; Moore, *Children in Irish workhouses*, pp 9-10; *Belfast News Letter*, 2 Feb. 1884.

⁵⁷ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 87.

‘unreasonable’ and ‘improper’ position of inspecting their own employers.⁵⁸ In the view of one Local Government Board inspector, the inadequate supervision exercised over hired out children meant that, ‘the door is almost necessarily left open to many abuses.’⁵⁹

As well as instances of abuse, hired out children experienced mistreatment and neglect by their employers. The scale of abuse and mistreatment is difficult to ascertain due to inadequate supervision by Boards of Guardians, however, and it is likely that more evidence was generated concerning children who were abused rather than about those who were treated better by their employers. In the early 1850s, the children who were returned to the workhouses at the end of their factory employments were described as ‘in a lamentable state of emaciation, disease, and filth.’⁶⁰ Evidence from the later post-Famine era suggests that neglect was widespread. One inspector noted that children who absconded from their employments ‘generally allege, as their excuse, the harsh treatment they have received from their employers’ which, upon investigation, ‘have been ascertained to be well founded.’⁶¹ In 1894, the Omagh Board of Guardians stated their belief that children were often badly treated and that some ‘underwent a great amount of hardship’ because ‘the Guardians seemed to have lost all sight of them’ once the children were hired out.⁶² Some employers did not provide suitable accommodation for hired out children who were found sleeping in outhouses, lofts, and on barn floors.⁶³ Boards of Guardians usually provided children with a suit of clothes upon their employment, but many employers refused to wash or mend them as, ‘these clothes are treated as absolutely worthless.’⁶⁴ The children themselves

⁵⁸ *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 84

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶⁰ *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 79.

⁶¹ *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 60.

⁶² *Belfast News Letter*, 23 Oct. 1894.

⁶³ *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 83.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

sometimes went unwashed as reportedly, the employers and the other servants of the house ‘will not wash the workhouse boy.’⁶⁵

Some hired out children suffered physical injury in their employments as the work demanded from them, particularly from children under 12, was reported to have been ‘beyond their years and strength’.⁶⁶ In at least one instance, a child may have died in consequence of the heavy work required of her. In January 1884, Mary Garland, aged 10, was hired-out ‘in a state of good health’ from the Castleblayney workhouse. On 10th October 1884, however, Mary was readmitted ‘in a dying state’, emaciated and requiring to be spoon-fed, and she died on 24th October. At the subsequent inquiry, several witnesses stated that Mary’s employer, Nicholas McBride, had made her sleep in ‘a bag in the corner’, refused to give her money for food, and regularly sent her to a nearby town to purchase coal which she ‘carried home ... on her back.’ One witness who saw Mary on 8th October on the road to McBride’s house stated that, ‘[s]he had a bag containing two stones of coal, and she could not put it on her back.’ McBride was acquitted of manslaughter, but the presiding judge suggested that, ‘greater care should be exercised by Boards of Guardians in seeing that the children hired out of the workhouse were properly treated.’⁶⁷ The heavy manual labour required of Mary and other girls by their employers was far removed from the duties associated with domestic service in a middle-class household which the programmes of industrial training received by girls in most workhouses was intended to prepare them for.

Hired out children may have experienced isolation and disorientation when employed at short-notice from the workhouse school into private households that were usually located several miles distance from the workhouse and where they were

⁶⁵ *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 167. For further examples of neglect, see: *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 83.

⁶⁶ *Kildare Observer*, 30 May 1885; *Thirty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 5319], H.C. 1910, xl, 1, p. 34; *Forty-second annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ *Belfast News Letter*, 6 Mar. 1885.

vulnerable to mistreatment. The Lady Inspectors were critical of the employment of children to isolated farmsteads on the basis that a workhouse upbringing made children accustomed to unquestioning obedience and thereby unable to protect themselves from abuse.⁶⁸ In rural Poor Law Unions, however, there were few alternative sources of employment. The limited supervision by Poor Law officials was compounded by the alleged indifference of neighbours to the welfare of hired out children. Neighbours seldom notified inspectors of the mistreatment of children by an employer, 'though they have a shrewd idea as to how the workhouse servant is treated.'⁶⁹ In such an isolated environment, it is unsurprising that some children were sexually abused by their employers.⁷⁰ The indifference of the public towards the welfare of hired out children contrasted with public expressions of sympathy for children who resided in the workhouse environment as well as the degree of interest in the care of children who were boarded-out. Rather than as vulnerable and dependent, the hired-out child was popularly perceived of as a (supposedly) wage earning independent labourer who had the freedom and wherewithal to 'leave if he likes ... if it is unhappy or ill-used'.⁷¹ Yet, despite mistreatment and abuse, children may have felt unable to leave their employments as they had nowhere to go apart from their workhouses of origin where they risked punishment for absconding from their employment.⁷²

The limited statistics relating to hiring out indicate that a considerable proportion of children did not complete their employment contracts, however. For example, of the 300 children hired-out from the South Dublin workhouse between 8th

⁶⁸ *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 83; *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 166.

⁶⁹ *Thirty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 83.

⁷⁰ For examples of sexual abuse, see: Ballymena Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1850. PRONI, BG/4/A/3; *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 211.

⁷¹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 84; *Thirty-ninth annual report of the Local Government Board in Ireland*, p. 34.

⁷² Several officials suggested that children were punished if they left their employment prematurely and returned to the workhouse. See: *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 478; *Belfast News Letter*, 23 Oct. 1894.

June 1858 and 25th March 1861, 103 (34.3 per cent) returned early to the workhouse.⁷³ Children returned for a variety of reasons including mistreatment, ill-health, an inability to perform the work demanded, and due to disagreements with their employers and other servants.⁷⁴ The interpretation of children's return to the workhouse was contested among contemporaries. Poor Law officials generally considered an early return to the workhouse characteristic of a child's dislike of work and a desire to return to the routine of a workhouse. An inspector stated that the early return of children to the workhouse:

[c]annot be matter for surprise, for the drudgery and discomfort of a servant ... forms a strong contrast to the order, cleanliness, regular meals, light work, and warmth and comfort of a workhouse; ... and no doubt there is often a desire to return to them, and an inducement to feign the want of strength in order to be discharged from service with a good character.⁷⁵

Social commentators agreed that some children returned on account of their laziness, but they argued further that most children who fled from their situations did so because their industrial training had failed to adequately prepare them for the demands of employment.⁷⁶ In turn, the Poor Law authorities blamed the low standard of employer of hired out children upon public commentary which characterised pauper children as untrained and 'good for nothing', and which allegedly discouraged of a higher class of employer from seeking servants from a workhouse.⁷⁷ By the late nineteenth century,

⁷³ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 522-4.

⁷⁴ For examples, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1852. NAI, BG/78/A19; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1890. NAI, BG/78/A/93; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/23; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1891. PRONI, BG/7/A/55; *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 452-8; *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 84; *Freeman's Journal*, 20 Nov. 1884.

⁷⁵ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 478. Officials alleged that some hired out children purposefully misbehaved to induce their employers to return them to the workhouse. See: *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, pp 479-80; Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1859. PRONI, BG/1/A/8.

⁷⁶ See: *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 48; Chichester, *Amalgamation of unions*, pp 11-16.

⁷⁷ See: O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 65; 1853 *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute children*, pp 344, 479-80; *Report from the select committee appointed to*

the belief that pauper children made poor servants, were liable to abscond, and were badly behaved had become well established in the public mind.

The appointment by the Local Government Board of Marie Dickie and Marcella Fitzgerald-Kenney as the Lady Inspectors responsible for the supervision of hired out and boarded out children precipitated belated reform of the hiring out system. The annual reports written by these inspectors were highly critical of the hiring out practices of Boards of Guardians, particularly the hiring out of children under 12, the payment of low or non-existent wages by employers, and the inadequate level of inspection and supervision over the treatment of children. The reforms introduced at the behest of Dickie and Fitzgerald-Kenney included a ban upon the hiring out of children by Poor Law guardians, the recorded payment of wages into Post Office savings accounts, more stringent criteria for the selection of employers, and the appointment of Voluntary Ladies' Committees to regularly visit the homes where hired out children were employed.⁷⁸ Such reforms were not implemented uniformly, however. In 1910, Fitzgerald-Kenney reported that the Lady Inspectors were 'practically helpless' against the intransigence and indifference of some Boards of Guardians towards the treatment of hired out children.⁷⁹ Consequently, hiring out practices in many areas remained 'unsatisfactory' by 1915.⁸⁰ Public indifference towards hired out children persisted despite the efforts of the Lady Inspectors to position hired out children as equally deserving of public sympathy and concern as boarded out children. This indifference was a product of the poor standard of industrial training received by the children, because they were generally older than boarded out orphaned and abandoned children and thereby perceived as more morally

inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland, pp 140, 220, 235, 241; *Seventh annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 71; *Cork Examiner*, 4 May 1860; *Freeman's Journal*, 9 Aug. 1879.

⁷⁸ For examples of reform, see: *Thirty-second annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 2320], H.C. 1905, xxxii, 703, pp xi-xii; *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board*, pp 163, 167; *Thirty-fifth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 161; *Thirty-sixth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 150; *Thirty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 27.

⁷⁹ *Thirty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 33.

⁸⁰ *Forty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 14.

contaminated by association with the workhouse and pauper parents, and, most crucially, because they were viewed primarily as independent wage labourers rather than as vulnerable children in need of protection.

IV: Assisted emigration

Assisted emigration schemes were another method by which children were placed into employment after a period of industrial training. From 1847, Boards of Guardians had been empowered to assist relief recipients who had been inmates of a workhouse for at least three months to emigrate, primarily to alleviate workhouse overcrowding during the Great Famine. Most emigrants were women and children. Between 1850 and 1859, women accounted for 58.2 per cent and children for 29.1 per cent of the 19,031 workhouse inmates who had their passages to Australia, British North America, and the United States partly paid for by Boards of Guardians.⁸¹ The emigration of pauper children was popularly viewed as a double remedy to the financial burden of the maintenance of children in the workhouses and to the dearth of labourers and domestic servants in British colonies.⁸² The removal of children from the workhouses to distant colonies was also conceptualised as a civilising process for pauper children whom it was hoped would lose their associations with pauperism and with the workhouse institution. This hope was directed to the emigration of girls especially. In 1848, the *Freeman's Journal* expressed support for the emigration of orphaned girls as 'a good and a wise step' because 'the promotion of wild Irish girls to the dignity of Australia [sic] matronhood is excellent and truly moral.'⁸³

Several scholarly studies have examined the emigration of young women and orphaned girls to Australia and Canada under private and government funded

⁸¹ *Twenty-fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [C 577], H.C. 1872, xxix, 1, p. 17.

⁸² See: *Belfast News Letter*, 5 Mar. 1847; *Armagh Guardian*, 27 Apr. 1847; *Armagh Guardian*, 4 Mar. 1850; *Cork Examiner*, 17 May 1852.

⁸³ *Freeman's Journal*, 26 Jul. 1848.

schemes.⁸⁴ The assisted emigration of pauper children during the post-Famine era has been studied to a lesser extent. Dympna McLoughlin has argued that many women with children applied for poor relief purposely in the hope of receiving financial assistance to emigrate, and that Boards of Guardians paid for the passages of women and older girls who in turn sent back remittances to pay for the emigration of their families.⁸⁵ There was a strong desire among girls and young women to emigrate. Anna Clark has detailed how girls in the South Dublin workhouse rioted when the Board of Guardians withdrew the offer of emigration as punishment for insubordinate behaviour during the early-1860s.⁸⁶ Although proponents of emigration hoped it would sever children's association with pauperism in the public mind, Ciara Breathnach has shown that children and young women sent to New Zealand from the Cork workhouse found it difficult to gain employment due to their stigmatisation as paupers.⁸⁷ This section focusses upon the emigration of Irish pauper children under the charge of British child emigration societies. Studies of the emigration of children from workhouses in England through child emigration societies have shown that such schemes had an imperial dimension for the settlement of underpopulated areas of Canada with white British children.⁸⁸ The role of these societies in the assisted emigration of pauper children has not been considered in the Irish context.

⁸⁴ For the most relevant studies, see: Joseph A. Robins, 'Irish orphan emigration to Australia, 1848-1850', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 57 (1968), pp 372-87; Peter Gray, "'Shovelling out your paupers': the British state and Irish Famine migration, 1846-50", *Patterns of Prejudice*, 33 (1999), pp 47-65; Trevor McClaughlin, 'Lost children? Irish famine orphans in Australia', *History Ireland*, 8 (2000), pp 30-4; Gerard Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor: assisted emigration to North America in the nineteenth century* (Dublin, 2004), pp 129-33.

⁸⁵ McLoughlin, 'Superfluous and unwanted deadweight', pp 66-88; McLoughlin, 'Workhouses', pp 722-35.

⁸⁶ Anna Clark, 'Wild workhouse girls and the liberal imperial state in mid-nineteenth century Ireland', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2005), pp 389-409.

⁸⁷ Ciara Breathnach, 'Even "wilder workhouse girls": the problem of institutionalisation among Irish immigrants to New Zealand, 1874', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39 (2011), pp 771-94. See also, Moran, *Sending out Ireland's poor*, pp 150-8.

⁸⁸ See: Gillian Wagner, *Children of the Empire* (London, 1982); Roy Parker, *Uprooted: the shipment of poor children to Canada, 1867-1917* (Bristol, 2008); Ellen Boucher, *Empire's children: child emigration, welfare, and the decline of the British world, 1869-1967* (Cambridge, 2014).

Some Boards of Guardians had initially sent children to British North America with the approval of a government emigration agent who would take responsibility for the children and the sourcing of their employments upon their arrival.⁸⁹ However, the Poor Law Commissioners repeatedly criticised Boards of Guardians for the assisted emigration of unaccompanied children on the basis of reports that these children were unable to support themselves upon their arrival in a strange land and were not adequately supervised in their employments.⁹⁰ By the late nineteenth century, the decline in the number of children in most workhouses, and the relative ease with which local employers were found for children through the hiring out system, meant that few Boards of Guardians organised assisted emigration for children. The Boards of Guardians of workhouses with persistently large numbers of children, particularly of the Belfast and North Dublin workhouses, occasionally availed of British child emigration societies. In almost all cases, British child emigration societies made the initial contact with the Boards of Guardians on the option of sending their workhouse children on their schemes. While some individual Guardians may have been motivated by imperial designs for the colonisation of colonial lands through these societies, no explicit reference to colonial colonisation was made in the records of Boards of Guardians. Instead, Boards of Guardians utilised the services of such societies to better source and supervise children's employments in Canada, and to further disassociate children from the workhouse.

The use of British child emigration societies was a source of political tension on the North Dublin Board of Guardians. In 1882, several North Dublin Guardians asserted that assisted emigration would improve children's economic opportunities as well as their social standing to a greater extent than hiring out to local employers. One

⁸⁹ For example, see: Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1851. TS, BG/151/A/13.

⁹⁰ *Third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 67-8; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [1381], H.C. 1851, xxvi, 547, pp 114-15; *Seventh annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 7-8; *Sixteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [3135], H.C. 1863, xxii, 341, pp 26-7.

Guardian, Mr Aldrich, stated that, ‘girls who were sent out from the workhouse to service in the city were looked upon with a kind of aversion’, but ‘if sent to America that stigma would be entirely removed.’⁹¹ Several nationalist Guardians described such schemes as a system of ‘forced emigration’ and that the children should be hired-out locally for ‘it was a wrong principle to encourage a system which ... would leave this land a wilderness, and denude it of all its sources of wealth and strength.’ Several commentators argued that the assisted emigration of children was unnecessary due to the prevalence of ‘waste lands’ in Ireland in need of agricultural development and ‘internal colonisation’.⁹² In 1895, despite opposition from some Guardians, the North Dublin Board resolved to send 25 orphaned and abandoned Catholic children to Canada under the auspices of the Catholic Protection Society of Liverpool at a cost of £12 per child. The children were sent to Liverpool with ‘a supply of buttered buns with soda water and milk’ under the charge of a workhouse officer and onto Kingston, Ontario where the Catholic Protection Society possessed:

a home ... where the children are placed until they are provided with situations and where they are kept in the event of their being out of employment ... thus preventing them from becoming a burden on the community.⁹³

The minute books of the North Dublin Board included no subsequent reports about how the children fared in their employments. It was possible that some information received by the Guardians from the Catholic Protection Society was not favourable, however, as despite further offers from the society to emigrate more children, the Guardians resolved that no more children were to be sent, ‘pending the report from the Canadian Gaol Inspector.’⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Freeman's Journal*, 5 Oct. 1882.

⁹² See: Gray, “‘Shovelling out your paupers’”, pp 47-65; Hayes, ‘The adult and young of the poor-house’, p. 690; Marion Muller, ‘Irish workhouse reform ii: boarding-out workhouse children’, *The New Ireland Review*, 6 (1896), p. 137.

⁹³ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1891. NAI, BG/78/A/95.

⁹⁴ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1892. NAI, BG/78/A/96; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1898. NAI, BG/78/A/108.

The fate of some of the children sent from the Belfast workhouse with British child emigration societies gives an indication that there was an inadequate level of supervision exercised by these societies over the children. Between 1907 and 1911, the Belfast Guardians sent boys to Canada, some of whom were orphaned while others were emigrated with the consent of their parents who were inmates of the workhouse. Catholic boys were sent with the Birmingham Diocesan Society for the Rescue of Catholic Children, while Protestant boys were sent with Mrs Brit's Home for Protestant Children, Liverpool.⁹⁵ The emigration of boys through such societies ceased in 1911, however, as the Guardians discovered that the boys were not supervised to the extent that the societies had promised. Table 10 details a report received by the Guardians in February 1911 on what had happened to several boys who had emigrated during the preceding years. Although some boys were reported to have performed in a 'satisfactory' manner in their employments, others had absconded,

Table 10: Boys assisted to emigrate to Canada from the Belfast workhouse, 1908-10

Name	Age	Date employed	Occupation	Conduct
James McAllister	13	11th August 1910	Farmer, \$1 with clothing	Satisfactory
Joseph O'Hara	15	18th August 1910	Farmer, \$1.50	Satisfactory
Patrick Boyle	16	11th August 1910	Farmer, \$2 with clothing	Ran away to Montreal; no idea of boy's whereabouts
William Boyle	15	11th August 1910	Farmer, \$1	Fair
Daniel Murray	17	28th May 1908		Not heard of; may be in Ireland
Patrick McIlvenny	17	22nd August 1907		Not heard of since January 1909
John Boyle	18	28th May 1908		Absconded

Source: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1911. PRONI, BG/7/A/87

⁹⁵ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1911. PRONI, BG/7/A/87; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1912. PRONI, BG/7/A/89.

and little was known of their whereabouts. The Guardians stated their dissatisfaction with the lack of supervision provided by the emigration societies and that the boys had not been traced by them. Roy Parker has pointed out that emigrated children frequently absconded from their arranged employments, which were usually low-paid and located in underpopulated frontier regions, and that the children travelled to urban centres for better paid employment.⁹⁶ The inadequate supervision over emigrated children, the risk of mistreatment by their employers, as well as the apparent dissatisfaction of some boys with their employments, suggests that some may have had a similar experience to the children hired out in Ireland.

V: Conclusion

The employment of children by hiring out or through assisted emigration schemes was one of the main routes by which children left the workhouse. The Poor Law authorities perceived of industrial training and hiring out as a single and logical process that would facilitate children's independence as wage-earning labourers. In line with the gendered nature of workhouse industrial training, and with the limited range of occupations open to the labouring classes, boys were generally employed as agricultural labourers or into the military while girls were hired as household servants by farmers or by the urban lower middle classes. During the early 1850s, however, many children were sent into exploitative factory employments by Boards of Guardians who sought to reduce the costs associated with the maintenance of large numbers of children in the workhouses.

The hiring out system facilitated the integration of pauper children into local child labour markets. There was the potential for much abuse and mistreatment of children because, until the twentieth century, the contracts agreed between Boards of Guardians and employers included little provision for the inspection and supervision

⁹⁶ Parker, *Uprooted*, pp 209-16.

of the children by workhouse officers. In addition, pauper children were reportedly paid wages that were far below the rate paid to the children of the local labouring classes.⁹⁷ This wilful undercutting of wages contrasted with the concerns of the Poor Law authorities regarding the impact of pauper labour and workhouse industrial output upon the livelihoods of local independent labourers. It is possible that, rather than simply as a form of employment, the hiring out system was viewed by some Boards of Guardians as a form of charity towards the pauper child who was expected to have been grateful for whatever wages and treatment were received. Some of the children who were sent to British North America with child emigration societies likely experienced similar mistreatment from their employers through a lack of supervision.

Much of this mistreatment, as well as the low standing of hired out children in the public mind, stemmed from the children's poor standard of industrial training and their stigmatisation through continued association with the workhouse. Some reforms were introduced due to pressure exerted by Lady Inspectors upon Boards of Guardians from 1902, but many of these abuses persisted. The hiring out system was the aspect of child welfare under the Irish Poor Law that was the most open to abuse and the least subject to reform.

⁹⁷ See: *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 166; *Thirty-fifth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 155.

Chapter Seven

Children's health and mortality

I: Introduction

The expansion of medical relief for the sick poor was a major development in the Irish Poor Law. During the post-Famine era, poor relief became increasingly medicalised as the connections between disease and destitution were better understood by welfare authorities. Outdoor medical dispensaries and workhouse hospitals were available for poor families to access in times of sickness and as part of their economy of makeshifts. As explored in preceding chapters, greater numbers and percentages of children were admitted into workhouse hospitals for medical treatment in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ However, the medical treatment of children within workhouse hospitals and the effects of the institutional environment upon children's physical health are currently under-researched by historians. Contemporary and present-day popular understandings of children's health in the workhouses have focused upon high rates of mortality. Yet, such understandings have been informed mainly by the Great Famine context. Official statistics pertaining to mortality in the post-Famine era have not been assessed critically. Children's health and mortality were determined by their circumstances upon admission, the standard of medical care received in workhouse hospitals, the sanitary conditions of dormitories and schoolrooms, as well as the quantity and the quality of food provided under the disparate dietary regimes adopted by Boards of Guardians.

This chapter examines children's health and mortality in the workhouses during the post-Famine era. It begins with a study of the medical treatment received by large numbers of children under the Irish Poor Law, particularly following the opening of workhouse hospitals to the non-destitute sick poor in 1862. However, the

¹ See: Chapter One, pp 38-30; Chapter Three, pp 86-8.

provision of medical relief within the workhouses meant that hospital treatment was associated with the stigma of pauperism and some families were consequently reluctant to seek medical assistance. The scale of mortality among children in workhouses is then assessed through a statistical examination of workhouse registers and official returns, as well as the influential inquiries conducted into the health and mortality of children at the North Dublin and Cork workhouses in 1842 and 1860 respectively. This analysis indicates that child mortality was considerably lower than has been popularly assumed. Popular perceptions of extensive mortality underpinned the promotion of non-institutional modes of welfare for pauper children. Although workhouse medical relief was an important source of healthcare for sick children, the prevalence of unsanitary conditions and the provision of insufficient dietaries facilitated the spread of infectious diseases among children, including among those who had been admitted in a healthy state.

II: Sick children and workhouse medical relief

Medical treatment for workhouse inmates had comprised an element of poor relief from the introduction of the Irish Poor Law, but its provision and accessibility for the sick poor both inside and outside of the workhouse expanded significantly during the 1850s. Under the Medical Charities Act, 1851, outdoor medical relief was provided to the sick poor through a system of dispensaries. The 163 Poor Law Unions were subdivided into 723 dispensary districts in which any resident poor person had access to medicines and treatment on the presentation of a relief ticket.² The establishment and development of the outdoor dispensary system was the primary factor behind the

² For studies of the dispensary system established under the Medical Charities Act, 1851, see: Ruth Barrington, *Health, medicine and politics in Ireland 1900-1980* (Dublin, 1987), pp 7-12; Ronald D. Cassell, *Medical charities, medical politics: the Irish dispensary system and the poor law, 1836-1872* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp 109-29; Catherine Cox, 'Access and engagement: the medical dispensary service in post-Famine Ireland' in Catherine Cox and Maria Luddy (eds), *Cultures of care in Irish medical history, 1750-1970* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp 58-61; Laurence M. Geary, 'The medical profession, health care and the poor law in nineteenth-century Ireland' in Crossman and Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland*, pp 187-97.

cessation of regular epidemic outbreaks of infectious disease among the labouring classes after the Great Famine.³ Historians have also noted the exceptionalism of the dispensary system in Ireland. Ruth Barrington has argued that the dispensary system was ‘one of the most innovative responses to meeting the medical needs of the poor in any country’ during the nineteenth century, while Ronald Cassell has concluded that it provided Ireland with ‘the most comprehensive free medical service in the British Isles.’⁴ The dispensary system represented a new departure in Poor Law ideology as it introduced an additional form of outdoor relief that was intended as non-pauperising and was not confined to the destitute poor alone.⁵ Dispensary medical relief remained largely inaccessible for poor families in geographically remote regions, however, and historians have noted that the standard of medical assistance provided by dispensaries had regressed by the late nineteenth century in consequence of the underfunding and inefficiency of the system.⁶

During the early 1850s, access to medical relief within the workhouse infirmaries and fever hospitals was also granted to the non-destitute sick poor. In the original plans for the workhouses, each institution contained an infirmary for the medical and surgical treatment of sick inmates. From 1847, in response to the prevalence of infectious disease among poor relief applicants during the Great Famine, fever hospitals were established separate from the main workhouse building for the treatment of persons suffering from contagious diseases. The infirmaries and fever hospitals were staffed by qualified Medical Officers who were employed by Boards of Guardians. From 1862, a loosely defined class of ‘poor persons’ were legally granted access to free medical treatment in workhouse infirmaries and hospitals.⁷ As a mark

³ Donnacha S. Lucey and Virginia Crossman, ‘Introduction’ in Donnacha S. Lucey and Virginia Crossman (eds), *Healthcare in Ireland and Britain from 1850: voluntary, regional and comparative perspectives* (London, 2014), pp 6-7.

⁴ Barrington, *Health, medicine and politics*, p. 7; Cassell, *Medical charities*, p. 128. See also: Helen Burke, *The people and the Poor Law in 19th century Ireland* (Dublin, 1987), p. 154.

⁵ Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland*, pp 38-40.

⁶ Cox, ‘Access and engagement’, pp 58-61; Lucey and Crossman, ‘Introduction’, pp 7, 163.

⁷ *Sixteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [3135], H.C. 1863, xxii, 341, pp 4-5.

of the separation of medical relief from poor relief proper, poor persons were not required to enter a workhouse with their whole family when admitted into an infirmary or hospital. The political context behind the expansion of medical relief, including the parallel development of county infirmaries and the opposition of the medical profession towards their subordination to the Poor Law Commissioners, has been well documented by historians.⁸

The legal provision of medical relief for poor persons in workhouse hospitals was the codification of an already widespread practice whereby, ‘as a matter of fact, the workhouse infirmaries had, since 1853, or even earlier, been largely used as local hospitals for the poor.’⁹ In their annual report for 1853, the Poor Law Commissioners, who had encouraged Boards of Guardians to open their workhouse infirmary wards to the non-destitute sick poor, observed that, ‘the Workhouses of Ireland are assuming, especially in large towns, the character of hospitals.’¹⁰ By 1855, the Commissioners had further noted that, ‘the class receiving medical aid at the public expense is a far more extended one than the class called destitute poor’.¹¹ The medicalisation of the workhouses was in part due to a recognition by the Poor Law authorities of the link between disease and destitution. In addition, however, the opening of workhouse hospitals to the sick poor was possible only in the context of a general improvement in the living standards of the labouring classes after the Great Famine. As the extent of destitution caused by family subsistence crises declined, the proportion of destitution occasioned by sickness increased. The decline in the numbers of workhouse inmates after the Great Famine further enabled the Poor Law authorities to redirect resources towards medical relief. A recognition that sickness was a potential

⁸ See: Barrington, *Health, medicine and politics*, pp 3-7; Cousins, *Poor relief in Ireland*, pp 96-104; Geary, ‘The medical profession’, pp 197-203; Virginia Crossman, ‘Workhouse medicine in Ireland: a preliminary analysis’ in Jonathon Reinartz and Leonard Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the workhouse* (Rochester, 2013), pp 123-39; Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 139-67; Lucey and Crossman, ‘Introduction’, pp 2-6.

⁹ *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland*, p. 66.

¹⁰ *Sixth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 4-5; Forbes, *Memorandums*, pp 275-6.

¹¹ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 19.

cause of destitution and pauperism led the Poor Law Commissioners to support the expansion of medical relief and, in 1857, they therefore ‘regarded with satisfaction’ the willingness of most Boards of Guardians to open their institutions to the non-destitute sick poor.¹² From the outset of the post-Famine era, Poor Law infirmaries and fever hospitals were a source of medical relief for the children of the non-destitute poor outside the workhouses, as well as for the children of families who were inmates of the workhouses on account of their destitution.

Despite the expansion of medical relief through the post-Famine era, there were few published official statistics related to the numbers of children admitted into the workhouses for hospital treatment. The official statistics in relation to the average daily numbers of indoor relief recipients show that the percentage represented by hospital patients increased from 15.9 per cent in 1852 to 44.7 per cent in 1901.¹³ In 1871, the rising numbers of medical relief recipients in the North Dublin workhouse led one visitor to remark that, ‘[e]very day the workhouse is becoming more and more a gigantic hospital.’¹⁴ The central Poor Law authorities did publish the annual numbers of persons who were admitted for hospital treatment, as well as the number of deaths within the workhouses, from 1871 to 1899. These statistics show that an average of 20.1 per cent of workhouse admissions during this period were by sick people, although this percentage fluctuated between a high of 32.4 per cent in 1875-76 and a low of 14.9 per cent in 1886-87.

However, these official statistics made no distinction between adults and children and they included no details about their illnesses or injuries. In 1861, an *Irish Times* editorial complained that this absence of subcategories in statistics related to medical relief meant that, ‘it is impossible from any of the tables given to estimate the number of sick children ... at any time in the workhouses’, and that ‘neither is there any table by which we can discover the proportion of children’s deaths to those of

¹² *Tenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2235], H.C. 1857, xxii, 137, p. 5.

¹³ See: Chapter One, p. 28.

¹⁴ *Freeman’s Journal*, 10 Oct. 1871.

adults, or the disorders of which they died.’¹⁵ This lack of information presents an obstacle to our understanding concerning how many children were admitted into workhouse hospitals, the ways in which these institutions were utilised by families of the labouring classes, or about the standard of medical relief provided under the Poor Law at the national level.

An examination of workhouse admission and discharge registers can reveal the numbers of children admitted for hospital treatment in different localities. Table 11 details the numbers and percentages of children who were recorded as sick upon their admission to the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in each of the registers examined for this thesis. At Ballymoney, 23 sick children were admitted in 1850-51 which accounted for 9.5 per cent of the total number of children admitted that year. Only one sick child (0.5 per cent of total) was admitted in 1860-61. The number of sick children subsequently increased to 28 (27.2 per cent) in 1910-11. At Belfast, sick children accounted for a considerably large percentage of children in each year apart from 1890-91. A similar pattern was apparent at Thurles where sick children represented large percentages of 26.8 per cent in 1870-71, 45.4 per cent in 1879-80, and 34.7 per cent in 1910-11. There was greater inconsistency at Thurles, however, as sick children represented only 3.2 per cent and 5.0 per cent of children in 1889 and 1900-01 respectively. At North Dublin, sick children were 28.4 per cent of admissions in 1860-61, but they accounted for low percentages in each subsequent register. These statistics show that there was considerable fluctuation in the percentages of children who were recorded as sick upon their admission into the workhouses. Rather than representing large annual differences in the numbers of sick children admitted to the workhouses, however, such fluctuations were more likely representative of inconsistencies in how sick children were recorded in the registers.

Sick children were supposed to have their illness recorded in the ‘disabilities’ column of the admission registers. This column was to have been completed either at

¹⁵ *Irish Times*, 30 Apr. 1861.

Table 11: Children recorded as sick upon admission into the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	Children recorded sick		Total children	
		n.	%	n.	%
Ballymoney	1850-51	23	9.5	243	100.0
	1860-61	1	0.5	194	100.0
	1870-71	8	6.4	125	100.0
	1880-81	13	5.6	232	100.0
	1890-91	12	14.0	86	100.0
	1900-01	19	10.9	174	100.0
	1910-11	28	27.2	103	100.0
Belfast	1864-65	464	36.2	1283	100.0
	1877-78	192	13.8	1396	100.0
	1890-91	85	5.3	1604	100.0
	1900-01	372	18.1	2056	100.0
	1910-11	430	27.0	1593	100.0
North Dublin	1860-61	212	28.4	747	100.0
	1870-71	15	1.7	871	100.0
	1880-81	39	2.2	1788	100.0
	1890-91	45	7.8	574	100.0
	1900-01	52	3.0	1753	100.0
	1910-11	130	9.0	1442	100.0
Thurles	1870-71	49	26.8	183	100.0
	1879-80	153	45.4	337	100.0
	1889	15	3.2	464	100.0
	1900-01	23	5.0	456	100.0
	1910-11	76	34.7	219	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

the point of admission by the Board of Guardians, or retrospectively by a Medical Officer after he had medically examined the children. Yet, the witnesses at an inquiry into infant mortality at the North Dublin workhouse in 1842 reported that the observations made by Poor Law Guardians on children's health were frequently ill-informed, and that Medical Officers recorded their own observations in separate hospital registers which have not survived. One North Dublin Guardian stated that the disabilities column was often completed, 'without any reference to the Medical Officer' as 'we were very frequently hurried in the course we took.'¹⁶ The Chairman of the Board stated that he 'attached very little importance to that column' since it was based upon the statements made by the parents of sick children. The lax recoding of children's illnesses was criticised by an inspector who stated, 'I do not think there is any entry of any account in all the Poor Law Books so necessary to be kept with accuracy as a true account of the state of the Paupers' health upon admission.'¹⁷ There was an extensive recording of illnesses in some registers but a near total absence of such information in other registers from the same workhouses. This inconsistency in the recording of children's illnesses implies that the extent of sickness periodically went either underreported or unrecorded. It is probable that larger and more consistent percentages of children were sick than the figures shown in Table 2 which are comprised solely of children recorded as sick or in need of hospital treatment.

There was a wide range of ailments among children recorded as sick in the workhouse registers. By way of example, among the 372 children who were recorded as having an illness upon their admission into the Belfast workhouse in 1900-01, the most common ailments were unspecified 'fever' (23.7 per cent), typhoid fever (14.5 per cent), diphtheria (8.3 per cent), measles (4.6 per cent), scarlet fever (4.3 per cent), physical injuries (4.0 per cent), other unspecified skin diseases (3.8 per cent), and

¹⁶ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, pp 32, 35

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

whooping cough (3.0 per cent).¹⁸ Other ailments recorded included bronchitis, diarrhoea, eczema, eye infections, meningitis, pneumonia, rheumatism, ringworm, scabies, tuberculosis, and wasting illnesses. Some children (13.7 per cent) were merely recorded as 'sick' or as in need of hospital treatment.¹⁹ Many of the above illnesses represented some of the most common and dangerous childhood diseases of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰

A smaller range of specified illnesses were recorded in the registers for earlier years. For instance, in 1864-65, 63.8 per cent of the 464 children recorded as sick upon admission into the Belfast workhouse were suffering from unspecified 'fever'.²¹ The recording of more specific illnesses in 1900-01 may have been due to more diligent record-keeping by officials, but was also a probable reflection of improvements in medical knowledge and an expansion in the range of treatments provided for children in the Belfast workhouse hospital by the early twentieth century.

The range of children's ailments recorded in the Belfast registers and listed in the reports from the Medical Officers of other workhouses indicate that sick children were chiefly suffering from infectious diseases. The numbers of children recorded with infectious diseases peaked during periods of national or local epidemics.²² Some children were admitted for the treatment of chronic illnesses and physical or mental disabilities. A visitor to the sick ward for girls in the North Dublin workhouse observed that:

¹⁸ Belfast Board of Guardians Indoor Register, Dec. 1900 – Mar. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/G/52; Belfast Board of Guardians Indoor Register, Mar. 1901 – Jul. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/G/53; Belfast Board of Guardians Indoor Register, Jul. 1901 – Nov. 1902. PRONI, BG/7/G/54.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Anne Hardy, *The epidemic streets: infectious disease and the rise of preventative medicine, 1856-1900* (Oxford, 1993), pp 43, 56, 67, 296; Angela Negrine, 'Medicine and poverty: a study of the Poor Law medical services of the Leicester Union, 1867-1914' (PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 2008), p. 158.

²¹ Belfast Board of Guardians Indoor Register, Jul. 1864 – Apr. 1865. PRONI, BG/7/G/1.

²² For examples, see: Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1850. TS, BG/151/A/12; Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/7; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/17; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. TS, BG/151/A/34; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/57; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1891. NAI, BG/78/A/94.

Some suffered from congenital deformity, some were idiotic; one fine little girl suffered from that frightful disease, hydro-cephalus [sic], another, a pretty and intelligent child, laboured under some mysterious cerbric-nervous [sic] disease.²³

In 1895, the ailments among children in the South Dublin workhouse hospital included ‘the chronic hip-joint, or spinal case, with cases requiring active surgical treatment, or of acute medical disease’.²⁴ Additionally, some children were admitted to workhouse hospitals to be transferred for treatment at more specialised medical institutions which their families were otherwise unable to afford or access without assistance from the poor rates. Such practice was particularly common at the North Dublin workhouse from which children were transferred to the nearby Rotunda and Hardwick hospitals.²⁵ More generally, Boards of Guardians availed of specialist institutions in Ireland or abroad for the treatment and care of children suffering from eye infections and blindness, physical or mental disabilities, or other diseases for which appropriate medical treatment was unavailable within workhouse hospitals.²⁶

The location of infirmaries and hospitals within the workhouse deterred some poor families from seeking medical relief for their sick children. By opening workhouse hospitals to non-destitute ‘poor persons’, the Poor Law Commissioners had hoped to separate medical relief from the stigma of pauperism and thereby remove ‘every prejudice against this form of relief which may exist, from any cause, in the minds of the lower classes.’²⁷ However, the stigma associated with admission into a workhouse continued to deter persons in need of medical treatment from seeking

²³ *Freeman's Journal*, 10 Oct. 1871.

²⁴ Catherine Wood, ‘Reports on the nursing and administration of Irish workhouses and infirmaries. 1. South Dublin Union’, *The British Medical Journal*, 1813 (1895), p. 796.

²⁵ For example, see: North Dublin Boards of Guardians Admission and Discharge Register, Dec. 1900 – May 1901. NAI, BG/78/A/83.

²⁶ For examples, see: Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1881. PRONI, BG/5/A/54; Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1912. PRONI, BG/5/A/93; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1891. PRONI, BG/7/A/55; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/68; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. NAI, BG/78/A/37; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1870. NAI, BG/78/A/56; Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1880. TS, BG/78/A/71.

²⁷ *Fourteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 9-10.

assistance. In 1865, the Poor Law Commissioners expressed their concern that ‘many lives are known to have been lost by the operation of unfounded prejudices’ which ‘have been created against the Workhouse hospitals in the minds of the poor.’²⁸ Crossman has shown that the Poor Law Commissioners viewed such prejudices and the refusal by sick individuals to enter a workhouse hospital as irrational behaviour on the part of the labouring classes.²⁹ Yet, the process of admission into a workhouse hospital involved many of the same stigmatising trappings associated with an application for poor relief. Persons who sought medical relief had to apply via a Relieving Officer or at the workhouse itself, they had their names and circumstances recorded in the workhouse register alongside persons in receipt of poor relief, and, in most workhouses, they had to wear the same uniform as pauper inmates. Such requirements applied aspects of less eligibility and the workhouse test of destitution to hospital patients and thereby deterred some families from seeking medical assistance.³⁰ For instance, in November 1861, a father declined the offer of medical relief in the Antrim workhouse infirmary for his son who had bronchitis despite the advice of the Relieving Officer who had ‘urged on him to accept.’³¹ The aversion of some poor families towards workhouse hospitals was reportedly only ‘gradually dying away’ by 1904.³²

The initial expansion of medical relief had been encouraged and praised by the Poor Law Commissioners, but there was little further reform or improvement in the standards of medical care provided in workhouse hospitals. By the late nineteenth century, both the Local Government Board and Catherine Woods, a trained nurse and experienced hospital administrator appointed by the *British Medical Journal* to

²⁸ *Eighteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [3507], H.C. 1865, xxii, 341, pp 28-29.

²⁹ Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 142-3.

³⁰ Alys Levene, ‘Between less eligibility and the NHS: the changing place of Poor Law hospitals in England and Wales, 1929-39’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), p. 324.

³¹ Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1861. PRONI, BG/1/A/10. For further examples, see: Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/8; Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1891. PRONI, BG/5/A/64; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/68.

³² *Cork Examiner*, 5 May 1904

investigate Irish workhouse hospitals in 1895, were highly critical of Boards of Guardians who did not improve their hospital facilities and employ trained nurses. Sustained criticism resulted in the gradual professionalisation of nursing in workhouse hospitals, particularly following an order issued by the Local Government Board in 1898 against the further employment of pauper women or nuns as nurses.³³ Boards of Guardians were slow to abide by this order, however, and they made few structural improvements to alleviate overcrowded and unsanitary conditions on hospital wards.³⁴ Notwithstanding this absence of reform, Crossman has argued that the medical relief provided under the Irish Poor Law contributed considerably towards improvements in the health of the labouring classes during the post-Famine era.³⁵

III: Child mortality in the workhouse

Children received vital medical treatment within the workhouses, but these institutions were, and largely remain to the present day, popularly understood as the sites of high rates of child morbidity and mortality. The close association between workhouses and child mortality in contemporary literature and in scholarly studies is partly explained by the shadow of the Great Famine experience when the overcrowding and prevalence

³³ *Twenty-sixth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 8958], H.C. 1898, xli, 1, pp 67-8. For criticism of pauper nurses, see: *Fourteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 9-10; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/57; ; J. Dowling, 'Workhouse hospitals', *New Ireland Review*, 7 (1897), pp 27-30; Anon., 'Pauper nursing in Irish workhouses', *The British Medical Journal*, 1769 (1894), pp 1194-5; Anon., 'Nursing in Irish workhouses', *The British Medical Journal*, 1817 (1895), p. 1054; Anon., 'Irish workhouses and infirmaries', *The British Medical Journal*, 1844 (1896), p. 1113; Anon., 'Irish workhouse reform', *The British Medical Journal*, 1911 (1897), p. 419; Anon., 'The Irish workhouse nursing question', *The British Medical Journal*, 2103 (1901), p. 973. For studies of nursing in Irish workhouse hospitals, see: F. B. Smith, 'The BMJ and poverty', *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 301 (1990), pp 734-7; Maria Luddy, "'Angels of mercy": nuns as workhouse nurses, 1861-1898' in Greta Jones and Elizabeth Malcolm (eds), *Medicine, disease and the state in Ireland, 1650-1940* (Cork, 1999), pp 102-17; Crossman, *Poverty and the Poor Law*, pp 145-52; Crossman, 'Workhouse medicine', pp 129-31;

³⁴ Crossman, 'Workhouse medicine', pp 133-5; Levene, 'Between less eligibility and the NHS', pp 322-45; Donnacha S. Lucey, "'These schemes will win for themselves the confidence of the people": Irish independence, poor law reform and hospital provision', *Medical History*, 58 (2014), pp 46-66; *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland*, pp 21-9.

³⁵ Crossman, 'Workhouse medicine', p. 127.

of contagious disease in the workhouses resulted in mass mortality. The deaths of workhouse inmates accounted for a quarter of the approximate one million persons who died during the crisis.³⁶ Poor Law statistical returns for the ‘fatal season of 1845-7’ show that the national weekly rate of mortality per 1,000 workhouse inmates peaked at 25.3 in April 1847.³⁷ This figure masked the regionality of workhouse mortality during the Great Famine, however. Weekly rates of mortality in Connaught workhouses peaked at 43.5 per 1,000 inmates in 1847. Children under 10 years of age, particularly vulnerable to starvation and infectious disease, accounted for over half of famine-induced workhouse fatalities.³⁸ The Cork workhouse Medical Officer, Denis O’Connor, claimed that the ‘fearful extent’ of child mortality had a numbing effect upon parents since, ‘death amongst them was divested of many of its most painful associations; there was no sorrowing, no tears, no wailing even of mothers for their children. To many, death came as a relief.’³⁹

Contagious diseases induced by starvation were the primary cause of mortality among children in workhouses during the Great Famine, but the extent of child morbidity and mortality was exacerbated by overcrowding, unsanitary auxiliary accommodation, separation from parental care, and the prioritisation by some Boards of Guardians of financial rectitude over the preservation of life.⁴⁰ By December 1851, however, the average weekly mortality per 1,000 inmates had fallen to 2.2.⁴¹ During the remainder of the century, the average weekly mortality per 1,000 inmates was 4.2

³⁶ Jonny Geber, ‘Mortality among institutionalised children during the Great Famine in Ireland: bioarchaeological contextualisation of non-adult mortality rates in the Kilkenny Union workhouse, 1846-1851’, *Continuity and Change*, 31 (2016), p. 102.

³⁷ *Second annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 10; *Fourth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 5.

³⁸ Geber, ‘Mortality among institutionalised children’, p. 101.

³⁹ O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Crossman, *The Poor Law in Ireland*, pp 22-3; Geber, ‘Mortality among institutionalised children’, pp 101, 111-12, 117-18, 120; Cormac Ó Gráda and Timothy W. Guinnane, ‘Mortality in the North Dublin Union during the Great Famine’ in Cormac Ó Gráda and Andrés Eiríksson (eds), *Ireland’s Great Famine: interdisciplinary perspectives* (Dublin, 2006), pp 104-5.

⁴¹ *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 2.

in 1861, 3.5 in 1871, 4.6 in 1881, 4.2 in 1891, and 3.7 in 1901.⁴² Mortality was much lower in workhouses after the Great Famine, but the association between workhouses and high mortality persisted within the public mind.

Newspapers published emotive depictions of high child mortality in the workhouses before and after the Great Famine. These depictions usually followed publicised statements made by workhouse officials or visitors regarding suspected high mortality in individual workhouses. In 1841, a magistrate described the North Dublin workhouse as, ‘a slaughter-house for children’ and the Poor Law as, a ‘system which immolated the children of the poor.’⁴³ In 1859, similar allegations about the prevalence of disease and mortality in the Cork workhouse were made by John Arnott, the mayor of Cork. Arnott’s statement precipitated newspaper editorials that condemned the Poor Law as, ‘a wholesale system of homicide, perpetuated in the name of charity’, and which produced ‘a fearful waste of infant life, and still more fearful ruin of infant health, among the inmates of our workhouses.’⁴⁴ Official sworn inquiries were established in 1842 and 1860 to investigate these allegations at the North Dublin and Cork workhouses respectively. Although these inquiries concluded that such reports were ‘to a great degree unfounded’ regarding North Dublin and ‘in direct variance’ with the evidence presented for Cork, they nevertheless failed to dispel the popular conviction in the prevalence of high rates of mortality among workhouse children.⁴⁵

The proceedings of these inquiries exposed disagreements between officials and observers on how to calculate mortality in a workhouse. An examination of the

⁴² *Fifteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2966], H.C. 1862, xxiv, 535, p. 2; *Twenty-fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 10; *Tenth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 3311], H.C. 1882, xxxi, 1, p. 2; *Twentieth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 6801], H.C. 1892, xxxix, 1, p.2; *Twenty-ninth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 1259], H.C. 1902, xxxvii, p. 152.

⁴³ *Freeman’s Journal*, 8 Dec. 1841; *Freeman’s Journal*, 13 Dec. 1841.

⁴⁴ *Daily Express* and *Irish Times* as quoted in John Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children in the Cork workhouse* (Cork, 1859), pp 3, 9.

⁴⁵ *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 Feb. 1842; *Belfast News Letter* as quoted in Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, pp 11-12.

different methodologies that were applied is essential as it informs the method of calculation for child mortality in workhouses during the post-Famine era more generally. Investigators at both inquiries had a threefold aim: to calculate the number of children who had died in the workhouse; to calculate the rate of mortality among children in receipt of workhouse relief; and to ascertain the primary causes of that mortality. The number of deaths was readily agreed upon at each inquiry, but investigators disagreed on the appropriate method by which to determine the rate of mortality and thereby calculated significantly different rates of mortality. This examination shows that there was a large degree of confirmation bias in the calculation of child mortality as the use of different methods of calculation was determined by, and in turn reinforced, the pre-existing assumptions held by investigators and witnesses on the causes of child mortality in a workhouse.

Those who alleged high rates of child mortality in the workhouses based their calculations upon the ratio of the annual number of children who died to the average daily number of children resident within a workhouse during a year. From this methodology, John Arnott argued that the rate of child mortality at the Cork workhouse was 18.0 per cent in the period 1856-59 as an average of 156 children died each year and the average daily number of children was 858.⁴⁶ Additionally, Arnott claimed the annual rate of mortality among infants under 2 was 110.0 per cent as an average of 132 had died and the average daily number was only 120 for the same period. Similar calculations for infant mortality at the North Dublin workhouse for January-December 1841 produced a rate of mortality of 116 per cent.⁴⁷ The Poor Law authorities ridiculed the calculation of annual mortality rates of over 100 per cent as an 'absurd proposition', but Arnott pointed out that, 'the explanation is simple enough', as it merely showed that 'these infants do not live a year.'⁴⁸ Thus, Arnott continued, '[i]n order to keep up your stock of infants, who are carried out wholesale in their coffins,

⁴⁶ Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. v.

⁴⁷ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, pp 6-7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7; Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. vii.

you must be constantly getting in a fresh supply.’⁴⁹ Such figures provided credence to allegations that the workhouses were the sites of ‘wholesale infanticide.’⁵⁰

There were several problems with Arnott’s methodology, however, due mainly to the initial presumption that children’s residency within the workhouse was the main factor behind their mortality. The use of statistics for the average daily number of children was intended to remove short-term and casual admissions from the calculation and thereby better estimate the number of long-term juvenile residents.⁵¹ This assumption was informed by the popular belief that most children in workhouses were either orphaned or deserted and therefore remained for long periods of time. Arnott thus contended that the Poor Law was ‘a system that is literally soaked in the life’s blood of innocent children, whose only crime has been their poverty and their orphanage.’⁵² On the assumption that pauper children were orphans and therefore would reside in workhouses for most of their childhoods, Arnott illustrated the cumulative effect of the high rate of mortality upon them:

Take a hundred children and deduct 18 per cent for 15 years, and how many will remain of the hundred? According to my reckoning *but five*. We, therefore, lose 95 per cent, or nineteen-twentieths in the fifteen years, that is before they arrive at maturity.⁵³

This argument assigned no weight to children’s individual circumstances or state of health upon admission and it implied that children’s risk of death was consistent regardless of age or length of stay. At the inquiry into infant mortality at the North Dublin workhouse, the Poor Law Commissioners contended that such an argument was easily misunderstood by the public who would interpret it as implying that children’s residency in a workhouse almost inevitably resulted in their deaths.⁵⁴ Indeed, interpreting the argument as such, the *Freeman’s Journal* called for the

⁴⁹ Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. vii.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. viii

⁵¹ Ibid., p. xi.

⁵² Ibid., p. 15.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁴ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, pp 5-6.

removal of all infants from the North Dublin workhouse to save them, 'from the sacrifice which inevitably awaits them, should they remain within its walls.'⁵⁵ The calculation of mortality based upon the average daily number of children implicated residency within a workhouse as the primary cause of mortality.

The Poor Law Commissioners rejected the calculation of mortality rates based upon the average daily number of children, however, and they argued that, 'it is not difficult to perceive that this method is fallacious.'⁵⁶ Instead, the Commissioners suggested that the ratio of the total number of children who died to the total number of children in receipt of indoor relief was a more appropriate method of calculation for mortality within a workhouse as, '[t]he population of a Workhouse is so fluctuating and peculiar' and included many individuals who were sick or whose health had been deteriorated on account of their destitution.⁵⁷ The Commissioners adopted this methodology as it was the method of calculation for mortality in hospitals. The Poor Law authorities argued that the inmate population of a workhouse, 'approximates to that of a Hospital' as persons in receipt of relief usually remained for short periods of time and no longer than necessary, and that sick children accounted for a large percentage of juvenile admissions.⁵⁸ Thus, at the North Dublin inquiry, the inspectors concluded that since many of the infants had been admitted 'much enfeebled from the wants of the necessaries of life; ... the mortality in this Workhouse may be fairly calculated on the same principle as in Hospitals', and the inspectors at the Cork inquiry likewise argued that since the workhouse was 'made use of as the chief receptacle for all the sickness and want' of Cork, the population of a hospital was 'essentially the same as that of a Workhouse.'⁵⁹ By this methodology, the mortality among infants under 2 at the North Dublin workhouse was calculated at 35.6 per cent for January-December 1841 inclusive, during which period 98 of the 275 infants in receipt of relief

⁵⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 8 Dec. 1841.

⁵⁶ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 11-12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 11-12; Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, pp 9, 14.

had died.⁶⁰ Similarly, the mortality among all children under 15 at the Cork workhouse was calculated as 4.3 per cent for January-December 1859 inclusive, when 366 of the 8,439 children in receipt of relief had died.⁶¹ This methodology produced statistics for rates of mortality that were significantly lower than those that had been originally alleged.

The Poor Law Commissioners argued that the statistics derived by their method of calculation repudiated the allegations of extensive child mortality in the workhouses. On the assumption that, 'children in a workhouse cannot be as healthy as those living outside', an inspector at the Cork inquiry concluded that the calculated mortality of 4.3 per cent, 'is by no means an excessive rate in an establishment partaking so much the character of an hospital.'⁶² This methodology implicated pre-existing sickness as the primary cause of mortality as it contrasted deaths to admissions and did not account for an individual's length of residency in a workhouse. The Commissioners' argument that most children were ill upon their admission was dismissed by Arnott who maintained that, 'as far as the children are concerned, but a mere fractional part of these are admitted as hospital patients.'⁶³ Most crucially, the Commissioners were unable to disprove by their method of calculation the widely held view that mortality was most prevalent among children who were long-term residents of a workhouse. Commenting upon the disagreement between himself and the Poor Law authorities on the calculation and interpretation of children's mortality, Arnott stated that, '[t]he war is now one of statistics, and the proper mode of taking them; ... the importance of which it would be difficult to exaggerate.'⁶⁴

The disagreements over which methodology was most appropriate for the calculation of mortality in workhouses continued through the post-Famine era. In

⁶⁰ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union.*, p.12.

⁶¹ Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. x.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp 9, 30.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. i.

1870, the Poor Law Commissioners maintained that children's pre-existing sickness was the principle cause of mortality and they stated that, 'workhouse children being ... taken from the lowest and most indigent class of the population, would naturally bring with them into the workhouse the seeds of disease and death.'⁶⁵ Moreover, in 1882, to repudiate further allegations of high mortality the Local Government Board published a statistical return that showed that the rate of child mortality was 2.4 per cent during January-December 1881 inclusive, during which period 1,446 of the 59,897 children under 12 in receipt of workhouse relief had died.⁶⁶ Yet, in 1896, despite concurring that, 'the workhouse is mainly a hospital and infirmary', the *British Medical Journal* nevertheless calculated a mortality of 25 per cent among all inmates by using the ratio of total deaths to the average daily number of inmates on the basis that long-term inmates were most vulnerable to infectious disease in the institutional environment.⁶⁷ Based on this calculation, the *BMJ* concluded that, 'the mortality is excessive' in Irish workhouses.⁶⁸ The different methods by which mortality was calculated continued to be based upon, and thereby appeared to confirm, the different assumptions held about the causes of child mortality within a workhouse.

The inability of the Poor Law authorities to statistically disprove the popular belief in high rates of mortality among children at the Cork workhouse led to widespread calls from the public for the introduction of a system of boarding out for orphaned and abandoned children. For example, in 1861, an *Irish Times* editorial contrasted Arnott's calculation of mortality in the Cork workhouse with a statistical return from 1860 that showed that there was only one death among the 450 children who had been boarded out under the guise of the Protestant Orphan Society.⁶⁹ To allay any concerns among ratepayers about the expense of a boarding out system, the *Irish*

⁶⁵ *Twenty-third annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, [C 156], H.C. 1870, xxxvi, 1, p. 36.

⁶⁶ *Return of the mortality of children in Irish workhouses from infancy up to twelve years of age, for the year 1881*, [C 277], H.C. 1882, lix, 97.

⁶⁷ Anon., 'Irish workhouse reform. I. A black list', *The British Medical Journal*, 1871 (1896), pp 1395-6.

⁶⁸ Anon., 'Irish Workhouse Reform Association', *The British Medical Journal*, 1884 (1897), p. 360.

⁶⁹ *Irish Times*, 22 Apr. 1861.

Times compared the £5 annual cost of a child's maintenance in the Cork workhouse with the annual payment of £5 10s. made to foster parents by the Protestant Orphan Society, and it argued that, '[t]his ten shillings turns the balance between life and death.'⁷⁰ In response to public pressure, and as an example of the power of scandal to elicit changes in Poor Law policy in Ireland, legislation was passed in 1862 which permitted the boarding out of orphaned and deserted children under 2 with foster families.⁷¹ The operation of the boarding out system, and its later extension to older children, is explored in Chapter Eight.⁷² The Poor Law authorities continued to contest allegations of excessive rates of mortality in workhouses, but the persistent perception in the public mind that high rates of mortality did prevail, and that long periods of workhouse residency were the primary cause of such mortality, resulted in a significant change in the mode of care for orphaned and deserted children under the Irish Poor Law.

Given the methodological problems detailed above, the figures on child mortality produced by contemporary inquiries are an unsatisfactory basis for our understanding of the extent of child mortality in Irish workhouses. A different statistical approach is required to determine the numbers and percentage of children who died, as well as ascertaining the extent to which such deaths were attributable either to pre-existing illnesses upon admission or to an extended period of residency in a workhouse. The inmate mortality in several English and Irish workhouses has been examined in several scholarly studies. In an analysis of mortality at the St Martin-in-the-Fields workhouse in Georgian London, Jeremy Boulton, Romola Davenport, and Leonard Schwarz have correlated the length of time spent by inmates within a workhouse to the suspected cause of their mortality: deaths that occurred within the first few days of admission were likely caused by pre-existing illnesses, while

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The power of scandal to precipitate changes in Poor Law policy and practice in England and Wales has been noted in the case of scandals at Andover in 1845 and Huddersfield in 1848. See: Shave, *Pauper policies*, pp 197-247.

⁷² See Chapter Eight, pp 272-80.

workhouse conditions became a more probable cause of mortality as the length of time spent within the institution increased.⁷³ The study found that mortality in St Martin-in-the-Fields decreased from an ‘extreme’ level during the first few days following admission and that deaths occurring after six months were mainly attributable to chronic illnesses rather than to in-house infections caused by unsanitary conditions. Similarly, in a time-dependent analysis of mortality in workhouses during the Great Famine, Cormac Ó Gráda and Timothy Guinnane have argued that a short interval between admission and death was an indication that an inmate was admitted in a dying-state, while a death after a longer interval was probably due to contagion within the workhouse and was thereby ‘fair indication of mismanagement’ by workhouse officers.⁷⁴ A time-dependent analysis of children’s deaths recorded in the admission and discharge registers provides a more detailed understanding of the causes of child mortality than given by official statistical returns.

Table 12 sets out the number of deaths of children as recorded in the admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses. Reflecting the greater number of children admitted to urban workhouses, the numbers of deaths were significantly higher at Belfast and North Dublin than at either Ballymoney or Thurles. Additionally, higher percentages of the total numbers of children died at Belfast and North Dublin than in the two rural workhouses. In the registers where illnesses were recorded, a greater percentage of the explicitly sick children died than children admitted without a recorded illness. Excepting the 1880-81 Ballymoney register and the 1870-71 and 1910-11 Thurles registers, however, the deaths of children who were recorded as sick upon admission were a minority of the total number of deaths. The percentages of children under 2 years of age who died in

⁷³ Jeremy Boulton et al., “‘These ante-chambers of the grave’? Mortality, medicine, and the workhouse in Georgian London, 1725-1824’ in Reinartz and Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the workhouse*, pp 59, 63.

⁷⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda, ‘Yardsticks for Irish workhouses during the Great Famine’ in Crossman and Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland*, pp 69-96; Ó Gráda and Guinnane, ‘Mortality in the North Dublin Union’, pp 87-90, 104-5.

Table 12: The deaths of children in the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	Children recorded as sick			Children not recorded as sick			Children under 2 years of age			Total children		
		n.	Admitted	Died	Of total deaths	n.	Admitted	Died	Of total deaths	n.	Admitted	Died	Of total deaths
Ballymoney	1850-51	23	0.0	0.0	0.0	220	0.5	0.0	0.0	18	0.0	0.4	100.0
	1860-61	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	193	3.1	11.9	83.3	42	194	3.1	100.0
	1870-71	8	0.0	0.0	0.0	117	5.1	0.0	0.0	22	125	4.8	100.0
	1880-81	13	23.1	75.0	25.0	219	0.5	2.1	25.0	48	232	1.7	100.0
	1890-91	12	0.0	0.0	100.0	74	2.7	7.7	100.0	26	86	2.3	100.0
	1900-01	19	0.0	0.0	0.0	155	0.0	0.0	0.0	39	174	0.0	100.0
	1910-11	28	0.0	0.0	0.0	75	0.0	0.0	0.0	23	103	0.0	100.0
Belfast	1864-65	464	8.8	36.6	63.4	819	8.7	18.3	62.5	383	1283	8.7	100.0
	1877-78	192	13.0	30.5	69.5	1204	4.7	11.8	63.4	440	1396	5.9	100.0
	1890-91	85	12.9	14.6	85.3	1519	4.2	7.9	70.6	666	1604	4.7	100.0
	1900-01	372	10.2	24.5	75.5	1684	6.9	15.9	63.2	615	2056	7.5	100.0
	1910-11	430	11.2	42.5	57.5	1163	5.6	14.1	68.1	547	1593	7.1	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

Table 12 (cont.): The deaths of children in the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles workhouses in the post-Famine era

Workhouse	Register date range	Children recorded as sick			Children not recorded as sick			Children under 2 years of age			Total children		
		Admitted	Died	Of total deaths	Admitted	Died	Of total deaths	Admitted	Died	Of total deaths	Admitted	Died	Of total deaths
		n.	%	%	n.	%	%	n.	%	%	n.	%	%
North Dublin	1860-61	212	16.5	37.6	535	10.8	62.4	274	27.4	80.6	747	12.4	100.0
	1870-71	15	13.3	2.4	856	9.5	97.6	372	20.2	90.4	871	9.5	100.0
	1880-81	39	7.7	2.3	1749	7.3	97.7	621	16.4	78.5	1788	7.3	100.0
	1890-91	45	22.2	18.2	529	8.5	81.8	210	19.0	72.7	574	9.6	100.0
	1900-01	52	13.5	14.0	1701	2.5	86.0	564	6.7	76.0	1753	2.9	100.0
	1910-11	130	16.2	20.8	1312	6.1	79.2	380	20.0	75.2	1442	7.0	100.0
Thurles	1870-71	49	4.1	50.0	134	1.5	50.0	42	2.4	25.0	183	2.2	100.0
	1879-80	153	2.0	42.9	184	2.2	57.1	71	5.6	57.1	337	2.1	100.0
	1889	15	0.0	0.0	449	1.1	100.0	125	2.4	60.0	464	1.1	100.0
	1900-01	23	4.3	25.0	433	0.7	75.0	86	3.5	75.0	456	0.9	100.0
	1910-11	76	5.3	66.7	143	1.4	33.3	53	5.7	50.0	219	2.7	100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Ballymoney, Belfast, North Dublin, and Thurles Poor Law Unions

greatest in the Belfast and North Dublin workhouses were generally higher than those for Ballymoney or Thurles. The percentage of children under 2 years who died was consistently highest at North Dublin, bar in 1900-01 when the highest percentage occurred at Belfast. Children under 2 years accounted for most of the child mortality in each year at Belfast and North Dublin. These statistics indicate that children under 2 years were most at risk of death, and that child mortality in its totality was highest in the large urban workhouses.

The length of time spent by children in a workhouse before they died gives some indication of whether pre-existing illnesses or factors associated with residency in a workhouse were the primary cause of mortality. By way of example, Table 13 details children's deaths according to the length of time between admission and death as recorded in the Belfast admission and discharge registers for 1900-01. In these registers, the majority of deaths in all categories of children (children recorded as sick;

Table 13: The length of time between children's admission and death in the Belfast workhouse, 1900-01

Length of stay	Children recorded as sick		Children not recorded as sick		Children under 2 years of age		Total children	
		%		%		%		%
1-2 days		18.4		11.1		14.3		23.4
3-7 days		15.8		11.1		10.2		22.6
1-2 weeks		21.1		12.8		14.3		9.5
2-4 weeks		15.8		15.4		19.4		14.6
1-6 months		26.3		36.8		33.7		27.0
6-12 months		0.0		3.4		2.0		1.5
>12 months		2.6		9.4		6.1		0.7
No date		0.0		0.0		0.0		0.0
Total	n.	38		117		98		155
	%	100.0		100.0		100.0		100.0

Source: Indoor relief admission and discharge registers of the Belfast Poor Law Union, 1900-01

children not recorded as sick; children under 2 years of age) occurred during the first four weeks following admission. Among children admitted with a recorded illness, 71.1 per cent died within the first month of admission. Additionally, 58.2 per cent of children under 2 years of age died during their first month of residency. Few deaths occurred among children who remained in the workhouses beyond half a year. These statistics suggest that most deaths were accounted for by children admitted without an explicitly recorded illness, but the concentration of deaths within the first month of residency suggests that child mortality in Irish workhouses was heavily influenced by the health of children upon their admission.

Ambiguities remain over the exact extent to which institutional factors such as poor dietary and unsanitary conditions were direct or contributing causes of child mortality. The under-recording of children's illnesses at the point of admission likely resulted in an underestimation of the number of children who died in consequence of pre-existing sickness. In addition, as a Medical Officer stated at the 1842 North Dublin inquiry, if a child was recorded as admitted with a certain disease and was subsequently cured in the hospital only to have then died from a different disease which they contracted while in the workhouse, the registers were not updated to show that their death was caused by a disease different from that recorded upon admission.⁷⁵ Consequently, the deaths of some children with pre-existing illnesses may have been caused by overcrowding and unsanitary conditions instead of their initial sickness. This ambiguity could be unpacked through a longitudinal study of registers which would produce a greater sample size of individual deaths and which may also incorporate periods in which children's illnesses and causes of death were recorded more rigorously by officials. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this project, however.

⁷⁵ *Inquiry into the treatment, condition, and mortality, of infant children, in the workhouse of the North Dublin Union*, p. 91.

IV: Ophthalmia and scrofula

There is clearer evidence to attribute the spread of ophthalmia, an infectious eye disease, and scrofula, a form of tuberculosis, to the long-term residency of children in a workhouse. These diseases became endemic in most workhouses as unsanitary sleeping arrangements and the low nutritional content of workhouse dietaries made children susceptible to contagion. Ophthalmia, an eye infection with the potential to cause partial or total loss of sight, was the most prevalent endemic disease among children in workhouses. Termed by contemporaries as ‘granular lids’ because of its drying and roughening of the conjunctiva which in turn corroded the cornea, ophthalmia was occasioned by a nutritional deficiency of vitamin A but it spread easily in unhygienic environments. The epidemic outbreaks of ophthalmia among children in the Athlone and Tipperary workhouses during the Great Famine has been examined in several scholarly studies.⁷⁶ In response to these outbreaks, the Poor Law Commissioners employed William Wilde, a renowned eye surgeon, to visit these workhouses and investigate the causes of the disease and direct its treatment. Wilde attributed the outbreaks to damp and unclean auxiliary accommodation such as malthouses and barns that had been acquired to alleviate overcrowding, as well as to the malnourished condition of the children due to prevailing famine conditions and the low nutritional content of the workhouse diet.⁷⁷ Yet, despite the decline in the numbers of children and the closure of most auxiliary accommodations after the Great Famine, ophthalmia remained endemic among children in many workhouses throughout the post-Famine era.

Children were more vulnerable to ophthalmia than adults. Statistics published in the annual reports of the Poor Law Commissioners between 1849 and 1871 showed

⁷⁶ E. Margaret Crawford, ‘Dearth, diet and disease in Ireland, 1850: a case study of nutritional deficiency’, *Medical History*, 28 (1984), p. 151; Leslie A. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and famine: food and nutrition in Ireland, 1500-1920* (Oxford, 2011), pp 150-1; Philomena Gorey, ‘Childhood ophthalmia in Irish workhouses, 1849-1861’ in MacLellan and Mauger (eds), *Growing pains*, pp 71-88; O’Mahony, *Cork’s Poor Law palace*, pp 176-8.

⁷⁷ See: William R. Wilde, ‘On the epidemic ophthalmia which has prevailed in the workhouses and schools of the Tipperary and Athlone Unions’, *London Journal of Medicine*, 3 (1851), pp 17-43.

that 159,537 children received treatment for ophthalmia in the workhouse hospitals. These children accounted for 62.8 per cent of the total number of cases of ophthalmia among relief recipients. Girls accounted for 54.5 per cent of cases of ophthalmia among children. This gender disparity in ophthalmic cases may have been due to greater numbers of girls than boys in some workhouse populations, but it may also have reflected the longer length of time generally spent by girls in ill-ventilated dormitories and workrooms in comparison to boys who were employed outside on the workhouse farm.⁷⁸ Indeed, boys on the workhouse farm were reportedly healthier than children whose industrial training was confined to inside the workhouse. For instance, in 1852, an agricultural inspector reported of the Galway workhouse farm that, 'the health of the boys is exceedingly good ... and few of them have suffered from sore eyes' despite the prevalence of ophthalmia in the workhouse.⁷⁹ In 1855, at the height of industrial textile work and training in the workhouses, girls accounted for 60.0 per cent of ophthalmia cases among children.⁸⁰

The effect of the workhouse environment in facilitating the spread of ophthalmia is clear from the statistics published in the Poor Law Commissioners' annual reports which recorded that 79.5 per cent of all ophthalmic cases were contracted by inmates while inside the institutions during the period 1849-71. In 1851, such was the exceptional prevalence of ophthalmia in the workhouses that the *Nation* termed it, 'a distinct Workhouse disease, only to be discovered there.'⁸¹ In-house infections may have accounted for an even higher percentage of cases among children.

⁷⁸ See: *Statement of the number of persons who have become blind in workhouses of the Kanturk union*, [265], H.C. 1852, xlv, 85, pp 3-18; Forbes, *Memorandums*, p. 237; Frederick Kirkpatrick, 'On the epidemic ophthalmia of the Irish workhouses', *The Dublin Journal of Medical Science*, 21 (1856), p. 340; *Cork Examiner*, 1 Jul. 1850; *The Nation*, 26 Apr. 1851; *Irish Times*, 7 Jul. 1862; *Irish Times*, 26 Oct. 1863; *Cork Examiner*, 16 Jan. 1865; Henry W. Jacob, 'Irish workhouses: "By their fruits ye shall know them"', *The British Medical Journal*, 1818 (1895), p. 1135; Clarkson and Crawford, *Feast and famine*, pp 150-1; Gorey, 'Childhood ophthalmia', pp 78-85; Lanigan, 'Tipperary workhouse children and the Famine', pp 61-2.

⁷⁹ *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor*, p. 133.

⁸⁰ *Tenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor*, p. 130.

⁸¹ *The Nation*, 26 Apr. 1851.

In 1853, John Forbes observed that only 2.6 per cent of children suffering from ophthalmia had been admitted with the disease.⁸² There was an absence of statistical returns relating to ophthalmia in the workhouses post-1871. However, the published observations by workhouse Medical Officers and by the *Irish Times* indicated that ophthalmia remained endemic in the populations of indoor relief recipients, especially in the large urban workhouses, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸³

The damage to the eyesight of pauper children infected by ophthalmia was quoted by critics of the workhouse system as evidence for the unsuitability of the institutional environment for the care of children. Between 1849 and 1871, 17.7 per cent of all ophthalmic cases resulted in either partial or complete loss of sight. The partial or complete loss of children's sight prevented them from attending the workhouse school, from receiving industrial training, and from being selected as a hired-out servant, and therefore hampered their chances of independence from the workhouse. In his 1854 examination of workhouse schools, James Kavanagh reported that children blinded by ophthalmia were instructed in basket-making but received no other form of education.⁸⁴ The *Nation* argued that ophthalmia had left many children as, 'a permanent charge upon the Union, and a burden upon society.'⁸⁵ Moreover, in 1869, the *Irish Times* claimed that, 'disease of the eyes has increased to such an extent that it is not very easy now to find a workhouse girl sound and healthy enough to send to service.'⁸⁶ 'Sore eyes' was a common reason given by employers for the return of hired out children to a workhouse.⁸⁷ Rather than providing for the education of a new

⁸² Forbes, *Memorandums*, p. 239.

⁸³ *Irish Times*, 12 Jun. 1869; *Irish Times*, 14 Mar. 1883; *Irish Times*, 10 Aug. 1899; *Irish Times*, 12 Dec. 1901; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1892. NAI, BG/71/A/96; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1898. NAI, BG/71/A/108; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1901. NAI, BG/71/A/114; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1901. NAI, BG/71/A/115.

⁸⁴ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 660.

⁸⁵ *The Nation*, 26 Apr. 1851.

⁸⁶ *Irish Times*, 29 May 1869.

⁸⁷ *Report from the select committee on criminal and destitute juveniles*, p. 479; *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 522-4.

generation of independent labourers as the Poor Law Commissioners had envisaged, critics of the Poor Law asserted that the spread of ophthalmia caused by workhouse conditions had instead maimed thousands of children and left them reliant upon poor relief for life.⁸⁸

Scrofula was another disease that was endemic among children in many workhouses. An infectious skin disease, scrofula was characterized by the swelling of lymph nodes and the spread of purple coloured abscesses and ulcers over the body. It was observed to have infected children in most of the workhouse schools visited by James Kavanagh in 1854. Several of the worst cases were included in his report:

- Nenagh: 70 of 325 present affected with skin diseases on hands.
- Tipperary: 70 of 277 girls present had scrofulous hands, and some of them *extremely* bad cases.
- Omagh: 25 of 49 in Girls' School showed skin diseases.
- Bailieborough: Boys and girls in the very lowest bodily condition; skin livid and purple; children looking thin, old, and miserable.

Ballymahon: Of 79 girls, 42 were visibly tainted with skin diseases.⁸⁹

Similarly, at the Cork workhouse inquiry in 1860, a Medical Officer stated that upon examination of the children in the school, he 'saw no diseases ... but cases of scrofula', and that 'the children in the sick wards ... were a perfect mass of scrofula; ... the limbs and some of the eyes eaten away, the lips and some of the glands eaten away; ... there were two or three whose faces were covered with ulcers.'⁹⁰ Scrofula and other infections spread easily in workhouses where beds were shared between two or three children.⁹¹

⁸⁸ See: Day, *The amazing philanthropists*, p. 137.

⁸⁹ *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, pp 659-60.

⁹⁰ Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. 19.

⁹¹ For example, see: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10.

The spread of scrofula was attributable to the sanitary conditions of the workhouses. Rejecting the suggestion from some Guardians of the Cork workhouse that many infected children had been admitted with scrofula, a Medical Officer pointed out that whereas scrofula affected only around 5 per cent of the children of the poor outside of the workhouse, over 20 per cent of pauper children were infected and that most of these cases were contracted while resident in the institution.⁹² Arnott and other critics of the workhouse system concluded that scrofula was directly related to factors associated with workhouse residency, specifically the consumption of a monotonous dietary of low nutritional content. Comprised mainly of Indian meal and bread with few vegetables or meat, the children's dietary regime of the Cork workhouse was described by a Medical Officer as having 'a most injurious effect upon their health.'⁹³ The Poor Law Commissioners contested the extent of scrofula and they dismissed some critics as being 'of a scrofulous habit, who know nothing about the disease' and who were alleged to have diagnosed any mark on a child's body as scrofula.⁹⁴ Yet, following the Cork workhouse inquiry, the Commissioners requested that Boards of Guardians increase the quantity and quality of the food given to children. Not all Boards of Guardians complied, however.⁹⁵ Scrofula was most prevalent during the 1850s and 1860s, in part a reflection of the larger inmate populations of children during

⁹² Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. 22.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹⁵ For examples of varying degrees of compliance to dietary orders by Boards of Guardians, see: Antrim Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1861. PRONI, BG/1/A/10; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1878. PRONI, BG/7/A/42; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/67; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Sep. 1860. NAI, BG/71/A/36; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1880. NAI, BG/71/A/64; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1892. NAI, BG/71/A/96; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1898. NAI, BG/71/A/108; Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1862. NLI, MS 12628; Westport Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1880. NLI, MS 12655. For a discussion of children's dietaries in workhouses, see: Crowther, *The workhouse system*, p. 215; O'Brien, 'Workhouse management', p. 121; Valerie J. Johnston, *Diet in workhouses and prisons, 1835-1895* (New York, 1985), pp 125-6; I. Miller, 'Feeding in the workhouse: the institutional and ideological functions of food in Britain, ca. 1834-70', *Journal of British Studies*, 52 (2013), pp 1-23; I. Miller, *Reforming food in post-Famine Ireland: medicine, science and improvement, 1845-1922* (Manchester, 2014), pp 65-74.

these decades, but periodic outbreaks continued to occur in urban workhouses during the later post-Famine decades.⁹⁶

The resources needed by Medical Officers for the treatment of ophthalmia and scrofula, and for the maintenance of children's physical health more generally, were frequently a source of friction between them and their Boards of Guardians. Scholarly studies of workhouse medical relief in Ireland and Britain have shown that Medical Officers were constrained in their capacity to provide adequate treatment for their patients due to the propensity towards economy on the part of their employers, the Boards of Guardians.⁹⁷ Denis O'Connor, a Medical Officer of the Cork workhouse, described his relationship with his Board of Guardians as a 'perpetual quarrel' over expenditure.⁹⁸ The spread of ophthalmia and scrofula among children was partly facilitated by the parsimony of Boards of Guardians who had the power to deny requests from Medical Officers for the resources necessary for effective treatment. For example, in November 1850, the Tralee Board of Guardians refused to sanction further purchases of wine and meat for ophthalmic patients even though the Medical Officer had argued that, 'many eyes have been saved by wine and generous diet.'⁹⁹ The Board considered this request extravagant and contravening of less eligibility; one Guardian stated that few ratepayers could afford wine and meat 'if his own children were under the same circumstances dying of disease.' Following the Guardians' resolution against the purchase, the Medical Officer warned them that, 'You'll have a great deal of deaths

⁹⁶ For examples, see: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/68; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1911. PRONI, BG/7/A/87; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1891. NAI, BG/71/A/94; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1902. NAI, BG/71/A/115.

⁹⁷ Irvine Loudon, *Medical care and the general practitioner, 1750-1850* (Oxford, 1986), p. 236; Ciara Breathnach, "'... it would be preposterous to bring a Protestant here': religion, provincial politics and district nurses in Ireland, 1890-1904" in D. S. Lucey and V. Crossman (eds), *Healthcare in Ireland and Britain from 1850: voluntary, regional and comparative perspectives* (London, 2014), p. 162; Angela Negrine, 'Practitioners and paupers: medicine at the Leicester Poor Law Union, 1867-1914' in Reinartz and Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the workhouse*, pp 192-211; Jonathon Reinartz and Alistair Ritch, 'Exploring medical care in the nineteenth-century provincial workhouses: a view from Birmingham' in Reinartz and Schwarz (eds), *Medicine and the workhouse*, pp 141-63.

⁹⁸ O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, p. 50.

⁹⁹ *Kerry Evening Post*, 9 Nov. 1850.

on your head, then.’ However, Medical Officers were occasionally the target of criticism from the public for their alleged inaction in the prevention and treatment of children’s diseases. After the Cork workhouse inquiry into children’s health and mortality, the *Cork Examiner* argued that the spread of scrofula had been caused by the ‘deliberate and systematic silence’ of allegedly indifferent Medical Officers who had failed to request improvements in children’s dietaries and accommodation.¹⁰⁰

Some pauper children feigned the symptoms of scrofula and ophthalmia to receive the more substantial dietary provided to children in the workhouse hospital. At the North Dublin workhouse, several boys were found to have deliberately bruised their skin to make it appear scrofulous and Henry Foley, aged 7, had attempted to simulate ophthalmia when he ‘put brown paper in his eye to make it sore’.¹⁰¹ In 1852, the Poor Law Commissioners claimed that the large numbers of children in the hospitals suffering from ophthalmia were inflated because:

a great many of the cases have arisen from malingering, especially on the part of children, who in order to escape school, or to obtain the better description of diet generally given to Ophthalmic patients, have rubbed their eyes with urine, lime, or other irritating matters, in order to produce inflammation.¹⁰²

In addition, during an investigation into children artificially inducing the symptoms of ophthalmia at the Cork workhouse, the Medical Officer found that, ‘the practice of making their eyes sore ... was of considerable extent amongst the inmates attending the Schools.’¹⁰³ The Cork schoolmistress reported that girls were inserting the indigo-dyed threads from their aprons into their eyes, and that she had seen ‘children tearing off the corners of the leaves of their books, rolling them up and thrusting them under their eyelids.’¹⁰⁴ The most common method among the boys was to rub into their eyes

¹⁰⁰ *Cork Examiner*, 3 Jun. 1859.

¹⁰¹ North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1860. NAI, BG/71/A/36; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1862. NAI, BG/71/A/38.

¹⁰² *Fifth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

a weed called ‘Euphorbium’ which, the Medical Officer observed, ‘grows plentifully about the Workhouse grounds’ and ‘all the boys appear to know’.¹⁰⁵ Of the 161 boys with symptoms of ophthalmia in hospital, the Medical Officer suspected that 140 had artificially induced their symptoms. These children risked not only damage to their sight through the insertion of painful irritants into their eyes, but also the contraction of ‘genuine Ophthalmia from the Patients who had been under treatment for that disease’.¹⁰⁶ Several workhouse visitors argued that this deliberate self-harm by children for the ‘miserable motive’ of a better diet was a damning indictment of the inadequate dietary provided to the children who were not in hospital.¹⁰⁷

V: Conclusion

The provision of medical relief under the Irish Poor Law expanded greatly in the years following the Great Famine. From the early 1850s, children and families of the poorer classes were granted access to outdoor dispensaries and to the receipt of medical treatment in workhouse infirmaries and fever hospitals. By the later nineteenth century, hospital patients comprised the majority of indoor relief recipients. Yet, for a relief system which had become significantly medicalised, it is notable that there were few published official records and statistics that related to the numbers of children who received hospital treatment. The analysis of workhouse admission registers has shown that sick children often accounted for large percentages of children admitted into the workhouses, and that most children admitted for hospital treatment were suffering from infectious diseases. It is probable that there was an extensive underreporting of children’s illnesses in the registers.

Children’s mortality has been the focus of much contemporary literature and scholarly studies on the health of children in the workhouses. The experience of the Great Famine has largely shaped the popular depiction of the workhouses as the sites

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Forbes, *Memorandums*, pp 238-9; *The Nation*, 2 Oct. 1852.

of mass mortality. The statistical analysis of children's mortality as recorded in workhouse admission registers has indicated that the extent of mortality during the post-Famine era was much lower than has been assumed and was primarily caused by the pre-existing illnesses of children admitted for hospital treatment. The role of the institutional environment as a contributory factor behind mortality remains unclear, but the weight of evidence points to pre-existing illness as the primary cause of children's mortality. The effects of the institutional environment upon children's health were more apparent in the spread of endemic infectious diseases among children after their admission into a workhouse. However, an understanding of the methodological disagreements between the central Poor Law authorities and those who had claimed that child mortality was extensive is necessary for contextualising the subsequent demands from social reformers and critics of the Poor Law for the removal of children from the workhouses. The introduction of a range of alternative institutional and non-institutional modes of care are explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Eight

Institutionalisation and alternative modes of care

I: Introduction

Throughout the post-Famine era, the Irish workhouse system was criticised by many social commentators and an increasing number of Poor Law officials as unsuitable for the care of children. There were widely held concerns that orphaned and abandoned children especially were at risk of moral degradation through contact with adult inmates and the children who had been admitted with parents. Observers of children in the workhouses repeatedly described them as exhibiting seemingly abnormal behaviours and emotions, as well as a lack of individual character, which were attributed to the psychological effects of an institutional upbringing and an unnatural childhood. In 1912, the Cork Poor Law Guardian, Susanne Day summed up these psychological effects as, ‘those which consist briefly but comprehensively in the word “institutionalism”’ and which she argued made ‘the retention of children in Workhouses ... always unsatisfactory.’¹ A range of institutional and non-institutional alternative modes of care for children were established during the post-Famine era to remove them from the workhouses.

This chapter begins with an examination of the observations made by social commentators and Poor Law officials on the effects of an institutional upbringing upon children in the workhouses. It explores the fears of contemporaries for the moral contamination of pauper children, followed by a study of how the behavioural and emotional characteristics of pauper children were interpreted as products of the children’s institutionalisation. Many of these interpretations were expressed in terms of prevailing middle-class understandings of childhood and its seeming absence in a workhouse. The perceived abnormality of a workhouse childhood was a key

¹ Day, ‘The workhouse child’, pp 171-2.

motivation behind philanthropic efforts to provide pauper children with some experiences of a middle-class childhood. The chapter then traces the expansion of the boarding out system from its introduction in 1862, the establishment of District Schools in the 1890s, and the attendance of pauper children at local National Schools in the early twentieth century, as the various methods by which children were removed from the workhouse environment.

II: Demoralisation

The workhouse environment was viewed by many social commentators and relief officials as destructive of children's sense of morality as well as their self-respect, work-ethic, and capacity for self-reliance. Several reformers argued that children were made especially vulnerable to the corruption of their morality due to the policy of family separation that took children away from parental influences. Archbishop Paul Cullen contended that the separation of families undermined the moral upbringing of children because he believed that, 'one of the greatest means of preserving morality ... is the operation of the family tie upon the individuals of a family, and that is altogether destroyed in the workhouse.'² In contrast, the Poor Law authorities judged the separation of families as fundamental to the protection of children's morality as it removed them from the influences of their pauper parents. In 1906, a Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform maintained that separation protected children from their 'vicious or worthless' parents, and that were children allowed to stay with their parents to satisfy commentators' concerns about family bonds, 'the usefulness and happiness of the children would be sacrificed to a natural but not serviceable sentiment.'³ Indeed, many of the commentators who had condemned family separation

² *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 185.

³ *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland*, p. 50.

were also worried about the potential demoralisation of children through contact with adult inmates.

Religious authorities were vocal in warning about the risks to children's morality posed by adult inmates. Girls were perceived of as being most at risk of moral contamination due to the presence of unmarried mothers and prostitutes in the workhouses. Prostitutes represented only a small percentage of workhouse inmates but, as Maria Luddy has pointed out, the common conflation of prostitutes with unmarried mothers by officials reinforced the widely accepted belief that prostitutes were much more numerous and that the workhouses were consequently dangerous sites of vice of immorality.⁴ In 1861, Cullen stated his belief that, '[h]aving vast numbers of degraded women in a workhouse must always be a great source of evil for young girls ... and must tend to lower their ideas of female modesty and purity.'⁵ Setting out the alleged ease in which children's morality became contaminated in a workhouse, Cullen argued that girls were corrupted by unmarried mothers, 'even without their saying a word to them', on account of the girls' curiosity:

they see them at chapel, and may see them passing here and there to their work; at least they always know that they are there, and the very fact of their being in the workhouse excites curiosity, and induces inquiry about their history, and why they came there.⁶

These concerns of Catholic clergy were echoed by their Protestant counterparts. In 1869, the Chairman of the Protestant Orphan Society in Antrim and Down argued that by fostering Protestant orphans with local families, the Society was protecting the children's religion and morality from 'being tampered with' in the workhouses.⁷

⁴ Luddy, *Prostitution*, p. 59.

⁵ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 186

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 186, 198.

⁷ *Belfast News Letter*, 9 Mar. 1869.

A recurring allegation was that prostitutes entered workhouses to procure young girls for brothels.⁸ Such claims were rejected by the Poor Law Commissioners as ‘general rumour, easily and credulously accepted’.⁹ Instead, the Commissioners maintained that girls in a workhouse were better protected from prostitutes than girls and young women outside, especially in towns, because of the system of inmate classification in the workhouse. Commentators’ claims about the extent of moral contamination among pauper girls, whether through their intermingling with unmarried mothers or by their recruitment by procuresses, peaked in 1861. By then, it was widely believed among the public that girls and young women who had been brought up in workhouses were almost certain to become prostitutes upon their discharge from the institutions. One commentator alleged that:

daughters after living a few years of squalid misery in the poorhouse, will leave the place and become prostitutes. They will live the lives of prostitutes and die the death of prostitutes: they will drown their wretchedness in drunkenness ... they will die of an unnamed disease in some splendid hospital. Such has been the fate of almost all the female children in the Irish poor houses.¹⁰

The moral contamination of girls was of serious concern as it was believed to negate any efforts to prepare the girls through education and industrial training for their employment as domestic servants which would lift them out of pauperism.

Concerns for the protection of girls’ morality were shared by many workhouse officials. When asked by a parliamentary committee how long it took for girls to become morally degraded in a workhouse, George Place, a South Dublin Guardian, claimed ‘that six or twelve months’ residence in a workhouse would be enough to demoralise an angel.’¹¹ During the 1850s, many Boards of Guardians adopted systems

⁸ See: *Twentieth report of the commissioners of National Education in Ireland*, p. 664; Anon., ‘St. Joseph’s Industrial Institute’, p. 2; Anon., ‘Begin at the beginning’, pp 1187-8.

⁹ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 64-5.

¹⁰ D. Caulfield, ‘Historical statistics of Ireland’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 3 (1862), p. 242, as quoted in Luddy, *Prostitution*, p. 59.

¹¹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 215.

of ‘moral classification’ whereby women were segregated according to their perceived character and marital status. Segregated accommodation was provided for prostitutes and women with multiple illegitimate children. Officials variously termed these segregated wards as penitentiaries, separation wards, probationary wards, lock wards, and immoral wards.¹² These descriptions indicate the penal character of segregated wards. Additionally, the record for the establishment of a segregated ward in the Ballymoney workhouse in 1851 highlighted its isolation from the rest of the workhouse: ‘The nursery now shut up as a penitentiary for females of bad character; ... the stair case to be closed up and the lower sashes closed.’¹³ Despite the attempted spatial segregation of prostitutes and unmarried women from girls, however, officials and commentators continued to view the morality of girls as under threat due to the employment of unmarried mothers alongside older girls in the supervision of infants and the performance of household duties in the workhouses.¹⁴ Systems of moral classification persisted into the twentieth century. In 1906, the Vice-Regal Commission recommended the establishment of separate institutions for mothers of illegitimate children on the basis that, ‘girls lose a sense of shame and become more and more degraded’ through their interactions with such women.¹⁵

The Poor Law authorities also feared that children with parents represented a potentially corrupting influence on orphaned and abandoned children. In her study of

¹² For a report on the systems of moral classification adopted at different workhouses, see: *Fifteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 80-90.

¹³ Ballymoney Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1851. PRONI, BG/5/A/8. See also: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1851. PRONI, BG/7/A/10.

¹⁴ *Fifteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 80-90. For records of repeated attempts by officials to enforce moral classification in the North Dublin workhouse, see: North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1861. NAI, BG/78/A/37; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/57; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Nov. 1891. NAI, BG/78/A/95.

¹⁵ The Vice-Regal Commission stated that, ‘the lapsing into confirmed immorality seems to be a tendency in Irish workhouses.’ As evidence, the commission claimed that ‘we have frequently found in the workhouse an illegitimate baby, its mother, and its grandmother, and in one case we were shown in the same workhouse a baby, its mother, its grandmother, and its great-grandmother, or four illegitimate generations in the female line.’ See, *Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law reform*, pp 17, 41-2.

children in London workhouses, Lydia Murdoch has shown that children who were casual inmates were viewed as morally corrupted because of their exposure to their parents' lives outside the workhouse.¹⁶ The corruption of casual children contrasted with the perceived innocence of orphaned and abandoned children; as Murdoch has argued, 'knowledge of the external world on the part of the casuals corrupted the imagined innocence of permanent children.'¹⁷ In 1861, one South Dublin Guardian warned about the moral danger posed by the admission of casuals into the workhouse school: 'It may naturally be supposed they give a version of what they have seen outside to the other children, and that great demoralization must result; I am sure it is impossible that it could be otherwise.'¹⁸ Similarly, in 1884, Sister Magdalen Kirwan of the Golden Bridge Industrial School for Roman Catholic Girls stated before a Royal Commission that prostitutes took their children 'to every horrid source of vice in Dublin' and that such a child, when admitted into a workhouse school, 'communicates to her schoolfellows all the evil she has seen and heard.'¹⁹ The assumed extent of moral corruption among casual children, and the continued rights of pauper parents to remove their children from the workhouse for short periods, meant that some officials and commentators viewed such children as beyond hope for moral reformation. Kirwan suggested that workhouse schoolteachers could exert little moral influence over female casual children as when a girl 'goes out from time to time ... and sees everything that is bad, it is very hard to make her good afterwards.'²⁰ In contrast, Kirwan argued that 'orphan children could be saved from such contamination' if they were separated from casual children.²¹

¹⁶ Murdoch, *Imagined orphans*, pp 48-52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 203. Additionally, Place warned of the moral contamination occasioned by hired-out girls who returned to the workhouse on account of abuse by their employers: 'I remember an instance of a girl who had been apprenticed out of the schools detailing her experience whilst she was out; her master had endeavoured to violate her, and she was sent back into the school, and was found with a ring of children round her listening to her.' See, *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 211.

¹⁹ *Royal Commission on prisons in Ireland*, [C 4233], H.C. 1884-85, xxxviii, 559.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Some Boards of Guardians introduced systems of moral classification among children in their workhouse schools to prevent orphaned, abandoned, and other children who were long-term inmates from communicating with casual children. In March 1862, the Belfast Guardians proposed the separation of ‘orphans and children who having been for at least 12 months in the house are likely to continue then for a lengthened period’ from the children ‘admitted with their parents who usually continue as inmates a very short time.’²² Other Boards of Guardians separated children based upon children’s family circumstances rather than by their expected length of stay. In December 1860, the Thurles Board of Guardians ordered the segregation of legitimate and illegitimate children into separate classes, thereby isolating the children of unmarried mothers from all other juvenile inmates.²³ The Thurles system was short-lived, however, and it appears to have been discontinued after several months. It is possible that systems of moral classification among children were neither practical nor economical because of the limited availability of accommodation for segregated classes and the required duplication of teaching resources. The boarding out system was in part established to separate orphaned and abandoned children from children admitted with parents for short periods of time.²⁴

III: Institutionalisation

The workhouse environment was also blamed by many commentators and officials for causing emotional and psychological damage to children through the suppression of their individual character and through the absence of what middle-class observers understood as the experiences of a ‘normal’ childhood characterised by innocence, happiness, and parental affection. The prevalence of misbehaviour by workhouse children was cited by commentators as evidence of children’s psychological damage.

²² Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1862. PRONI, BG/7/A/24.

²³ Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1860. TS, BG/151/A/32.

²⁴ See: Virginia Crossman, “‘Facts notorious to the whole country’: the political battle over Irish Poor Law reform in the 1860s”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 20 (2010), pp 157-9.

Commentators argued that insubordination and violence by pauper children was attributable to the coerciveness of the workhouse environment upon children's minds. For example, in 1861, the philanthropist Ellen Woodlock argued that in comparison to poor children outside the workhouse, who she perceived as better behaved and more anxious to work, pauper girls were allegedly 'lazy, idle, careless, and apathetic', 'exceedingly selfish' and 'shut up in themselves', and 'besides being violent in the extreme, they are sulky, which is not usually the case where the temper is violent.'²⁵ In addition, pauper boys, according to Kirwan, were sullen, self-absorbed, and they 'would sit on a form all day long as if they had no mind ... you never saw them smile or talk, or do any act of kindness for anyone' and they acted 'as if nobody cared for them and that they cared for nobody.'²⁶ These forms of behaviours were attributed by commentators to the absence of parental influence over the children, a lack of mental stimulation, and the strict discipline of the workhouse regime under which the children 'dare not answer the officials, and consequently they sulk for hours.'²⁷

The psychological effects of the institutional environment upon children are difficult for historians to uncover and interpret. The Poor Law Commissioners had been dismissive of claims that misbehaviour stemmed from a workhouse upbringing. In 1860, the Commissioners stated their view that:

the alleged pauperizing influence of the institution, especially as affecting the minds and habits of the juvenile classes, ... much misconception exists on this subject in Ireland, and that the proportion of those who have been brought up on workhouses turn out badly, has been greatly exaggerated.²⁸

²⁵ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, pp 220-1. For examples of similar descriptions of pauper children, see: O'Connor, *Seventeen years' experience*, pp 19-20; Isabella S. M. Tod, 'Boarding-out of pauper children', *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 7 (1878), pp 293-9; Day, 'The workhouse child', pp 170-4.

²⁶ *Royal Commission on prisons in Ireland*, p. 109.

²⁷ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 220.

²⁸ *Fourteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 10.

Mel Cousins has suggested that insubordination by girls and young women in the South Dublin workhouse between 1857 and 1862 corresponded with the ‘coming-of-age’ of the children who had resided in the workhouse for much of their childhood since their admission during the Great Famine.²⁹ In 1862, the Poor Law Commissioners noted that, among girls, ‘a great tendency to insubordination ... had of late years shown itself from time to time, and occasionally assumed a very aggravated form.’³⁰ Insubordination was most pronounced in the South Dublin workhouse ‘where repeated attempts have been made to set fire to the premises, and these attempts have sometimes been attended by violent resistance to the officers, and by riot and tumult.’³¹ However, there had also been an ‘exhibition of similar spirit’ by the girls in other large workhouses.³² Officials reasoned that the girls’ behaviour was driven by a ‘feeling of irksomeness on the minds of the adult, or nearly adult classes’ within a workhouse which served ‘to create a wholesale desire to change the scene and go elsewhere.’ The withdrawal of promised offers of emigration was cited as having caused ‘a bitter feeling of disappointment’ for the girls who vented their frustration through physical and verbal insubordinate behaviour.³³ Nationalist commentators referenced the girls’ actions in their critiques of the workhouse system and some historians have hence argued that insubordination was an expression of a wider nationalist resistance to the Poor Law.³⁴ Yet, while such insubordination was often a collective action, it should be viewed principally as the manifested frustrations of individual children within an environment that afforded few outlets for their emotional expressions.

²⁹ Mel Cousins, ‘Collective action and the Poor Law: the political mobilisation of the Irish poor, 1851-78’ in William Sheehan and Maura Cronin (eds), *Riotous assemblies: rebels, riots and revolts in Ireland* (Cork, 2011), p. 116.

³⁰ *Sixteenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp 12-13.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ For interpretations of the insubordination by the South Dublin girls as an element of wider nationalist resistance to the poor law, see: Clark, ‘Wild workhouse girls’, pp 389-409; Cousins, ‘Collective action’, pp 110-26.

Pauper children were reportedly socially and emotionally suppressed and without any individuality. From as early as the 1850s, pauper children were described as having the ‘poor-house look’ by which they were characterised as sullen, dull, and apathetic.³⁵ In 1868, the *Irish Times* described the pauper child as ‘like a watch in which the main spring is broken’, and for whom ‘existence is a mechanical routine’ because ‘everything that is distinctly human in it is left undeveloped’.³⁶ Isabella Tod, a vocal advocate for the boarding out system, argued that pauper children grew up to reflect ‘the completely mechanical aspect of everybody and everything’ in the workhouse institution.³⁷ In 1896, another commentator alleged that the unstimulating institutional environment served ‘to deaden the children’s sensitive nerves’ and thereby ‘to flatten them into one inert mass’.³⁸ Some workhouse officers agreed with such observations. Denis O’Connor, a Cork Medical Officer, theorised that the sameness in which children were treated by officials, and the sameness of their daily lived experiences, produced their sameness of appearance and demeanour:

The same din of the school and playground is for ever ringing in their ears, and the same blank walls are for ever before their eyes. They have all the same unsightly dress, the same trim of the hair; no wonder they should all have the same coarse guttural voice, the same unvarying expression in their countenance, and the strange similarity of features which strikes the casual visitor with surprise.³⁹

Furthermore, the education reformer John O’Hagan noted that as well as the suppression of positive emotions, the stigma of pauperism had instilled in children feelings of anger and self-loathing as ‘the fruit of an abhorred coercion’:

it is not indifference merely – it is not a merely a blank where tenderness and affection ought to exist that he experiences, he is too likely to be made acquainted from the earliest period with that feeling which, more than any other, tends to kill all kindly relations – namely, the feeling

³⁵ Anon, ‘St Joseph’s Industrial institute’, p. 6.

³⁶ *Irish Times*, 10 Apr. 1868.

³⁷ Tod, ‘Boarding-out of pauper children’, p. 297.

³⁸ Muller, ‘Irish workhouse reform ii’, p. 133.

³⁹ O’Connor, *Seventeen years’ experience*, pp 67-8.

that he is an object of contempt, and his heart will naturally grow hard against his fellow-creatures who he feels despise him.⁴⁰

This emotional hardness was alleged to have manifested itself as the ‘violent passion and obstinate sulk’ exhibited by children in the workhouse and by those who had been hired out.⁴¹ The institutional environment constrained children’s individuality and it stifled the expression of emotion.

Children who exhibited such behavioural and emotional characteristics were alleged to have become lifelong paupers. Commentators cited the apparent development, particularly among children who were long term inmates, of a kind of revelry in pauperism and a preference to remain in a workhouse rather than seek employment and independence. In 1861, the Dublin philanthropist Ellen Woodlock claimed that among girls, ‘the longer they are in a workhouse, the more they enjoy it’ as ‘they are apt to be too fond of the place where they have been reared; ... get accustomed to it, and do not know what a misfortune it is to be there’ to the point where ‘one of them declared that she loved the very walls of the workhouse’ and ‘they look down on the girls who come in for a short time.’⁴² Woodlock argued that a boarding out system would restore children’s sense of shame in pauperism because by their removal from the institution, ‘they would naturally acquire the horror of the workhouse which every other poor person has.’⁴³ Children’s apparent preference to stay in a workhouse rather than be hired out was interpreted by officials as a sign of moral degradation.⁴⁴ Susanne Day blamed these abnormal behaviours upon the institutional environment, however, and she argued that the workhouse system was

⁴⁰ *Belfast News Letter*, 29 Jan. 1859.

⁴¹ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 48.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 222. See also: *Freeman’s Journal*, 12 Jul. 1871; Chichester, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 12; Day, ‘The workhouse child’, p. 170.

⁴³ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 222.

⁴⁴ The Catholic chaplain of the Sligo workhouse stated, ‘children who have worn the Workhouse brand consider themselves as a degraded race, and are wanting in self-respect.’ See: Chichester, *Amalgamation of unions*, p. 8.

‘producing abnormalities’ whose ‘lives are unchildlike’ and ‘institutionalised out of all semblance of childhood.’⁴⁵

These apparently unchildlike characteristics of pauper children were attributed by observers in part to the limited provision for normative childhood experiences in a workhouse. Boards of Guardians were criticised by commentators for making little effort to accommodate children’s play and recreation. In 1859, a visitor to a workhouse described boys in their yard as:

stunted little creatures neither child-like, nor human-like; they are at *play*, sitting close packed against the wall, or gathered into knots, dull and stupefied ...; no ghost of a ball, or hoop, or pegging-top to mind them of a child’s nature; pauper boys must be taught to do without these things.⁴⁶

Some limited efforts were made to provide for children’s play. For instance, in 1861, the Belfast Board of Guardians installed ‘swing-poles’ in the yards, but these soon became broken and were not replaced.⁴⁷ The repurposing of a ward into a playroom for girls in the North Dublin Union was criticised by the *Dublin Evening Mail* as well-intentioned but entirely unsuitable:

It is a long, narrow shed, with a break-neck, drain-like channel in the centre, highly suggestive of broken bones, where a girl’s game would be impossible; no lively “four corners,” no merry “blind man’s buff” could be accomplished there, or any other cheery romp Two girls may “turn a rope,” while a third leaps in dreary time in the middle.⁴⁸

A lack of accommodation for children’s play persisted into the twentieth century. In 1910, an inspector observed that, ‘child-life is seen in its darkest and most unhappy conditions inside a workhouse yard; ... pent up behind a dreary wall, with a few feet

⁴⁵ Day, ‘The workhouse child’, pp 174-5; Day, *The amazing philanthropists*, p. 95.

⁴⁶ Anon., ‘Begin the beginning’, p. 1182.

⁴⁷ Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/23. See also, North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1851. NAI, BG/78/A/17.

⁴⁸ Arnott, *The investigation into the condition of the children*, p. 10.

of gravelled yard for a play-ground.⁴⁹ The absence of play and recreation highlighted the limitations of the workhouse environment for the accommodation of childhood.

The absence in a workhouse of what middle-class observers regarded as normative childhood activities, and the perceived negative implications of this absence for children's emotional and behavioural development, motivated philanthropic efforts to introduce some semblance of what was recognised as a middle-class childhood into the lives of workhouse children. Rather than upon the material aspects of welfare such as diet and clothing – which were funded through the poor rate – middle-class philanthropy towards workhouse children was focused upon gifting the experiences and emotions that were associated with childhood. Daytrips and excursions were the most common form of this charity. Boards of Guardians, especially those of large urban workhouses, received invitations for children to visit circuses, theatre shows, exhibitions, stately homes, and zoos and gardens, usually free of charge.⁵⁰ Railway companies arranged for annual expenses-paid daytrips to seaside towns for the children and their teachers.⁵¹ In August 1907, the *Munster Express* reported upon the summer excursion arranged for children from the Waterford workhouse to an estate in the nearby town of Kilmacow:

On entering the wide and undulating lawn, with its giant trees, the youngsters were delighted to find that Mr. Langley, the steward, had thoughtfully provided swings under the spreading trees; a middle piece and football were also close at hand, all of which were kept in active

⁴⁹ *Thirty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 28.

⁵⁰ For examples of invites for children to attend theatre performances etc., see: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Apr. 1861. PRONI, BG/7/A/24; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Oct. 1871. PRONI, BG/7/A/35; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jun. 1891. PRONI, BG/7/A/55; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/68; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Mar. 1911. PRONI, BG/7/A/87; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1871. NAI, BG/78/A/56; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1872. NAI, BG/78/A/59; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1881. NAI, BG/78/A/75; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1881. NAI, BG/78/A/76; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Feb. 1882. NAI, BG/78/A/77; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jan. 1892. NAI, BG/78/A/96; North Dublin Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1900. NAI, BG/78/A/113.

⁵¹ For examples of daytrip excursions, see: Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Aug. 1881. PRONI, BG/7/A/45; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, May 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/67; Belfast Board of Guardians Minute Book, Jul. 1901. PRONI, BG/7/A/68.

demand during the day. All Kilmacow, young and old, turned up to welcome and help to amuse them. ... Here was Irish step-dancing going on; there were Kilmacow little girls and boys swinging the workhouse children and the workhouse children swinging them, while yonder was a football match under weigh [sic] with as much enthusiasm as if it were an All-Ireland Championship.⁵²

Philanthropists hoped that such excursions would provide children a temporary reprieve from their demoralisation and institutionalisation in the workhouse. Furthermore, by introducing children to the outside world, excursions were a means by which to facilitate the socialisation of the workhouse child and improve its image among the public.

Boards of Guardians couched their appeals to middle-class philanthropy in terms of the gifting of childhood experiences. For example, in 1874, when the Local Government Board refused to sanction the use of poor rate funds towards the children's summer excursion from the Cork workhouse, the Guardians appealed to the public to support this rare and fleeting experience of childhood for the pauper child:

We have no doubt ... that the benevolence of the public will more than supplement any deficiency. ... and we hope there are few who would refuse to help in brightening, even though but for a day, the lives of those children whom poverty has doomed to a position where the freedom and enjoyment of childhood are to a great extent unknown.⁵³

Poor Law Guardians, most of who had a middle-class background, likely shared in the prevailing middle-class cultural ideals of childhood. Excursions and daytrips were a means by which Boards of Guardians provided children with experiences otherwise impossible within the confines of a workhouse, and their support for such experiences communicated to the wider public that consideration was being made for the childhoods of pauper children.

Christmas celebrations were another form of philanthropy directed at providing childhood experiences to the pauper child. During the nineteenth and early twentieth

⁵² *Munster Express*, 17 Aug. 1907.

⁵³ *Cork Examiner*, 22 Jul. 1874.

centuries, the middle classes closely associated Christmas festivities with a celebration of children and childhood. In 1867, the *Irish Times* described Christmas as, ‘associated with the early youth of all classes, and the old in the pleasures of the young live their childhood over again.’⁵⁴ Laura Foster has shown that in nineteenth-century England, Christmas celebrations in the workhouses ‘gradually became the cultural domain of the middle classes’ and were a focus for philanthropy towards the poor.⁵⁵ The Christmas celebrations arranged for children in Irish workhouses involved the distribution of donated toys and the attendance of local dignitaries. In 1867, the *Cork Examiner* reported that, ‘The brightest day in all the year at the Cork workhouse is the children’s *fete* day’:

It means the rendering glad, for a whole season, of nearly 800 children of all ages from extreme infancy up to boyhood and girlhood, who at no other season of the year, it may be said, can, from the nature of their position, taste any of the ordinary delights of childhood.⁵⁶

Similarly, the *Freeman’s Journal* described Christmas as an opportunity for ‘letting in the sunshine’ into a workhouse, and depicted the celebrations at the Killarney workhouse in 1869 as the sole occasion during which the children were allowed to fully express their childhood.⁵⁷ The newspaper contended that, ‘Boards of Guardians have under their control and keeping an enormous quantity of sunshine’ with which they could ‘make the workhouse school one year-long Christmas.’ Yet, such childhood experiences were brief and temporary for pauper children. Susanne Day argued that these momentary experiences failed to counteract the children’s ‘dreary, monotonous existences filled with dreary, monotonous duties, day in day out practically without interruption – a day in the country or a treat at Christmas being the sum total of their amusements.’⁵⁸ Many commentators therefore concluded that a

⁵⁴ *Irish Times*, 24 Dec. 1867.

⁵⁵ Laura Foster, ‘Christmas in the workhouse: staging philanthropy in the nineteenth-century periodical’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 22 (2017), p. 556.

⁵⁶ *Cork Examiner*, 24 Dec. 1867.

⁵⁷ *Freeman’s Journal*, 5 Jan. 1869.

⁵⁸ Day, ‘The workhouse child’, p. 173.

more permanent method was required by which to provide pauper children with the experience of ‘normal’ childhood outside of the workhouse institution.

IV: Childhood and the boarding out system

In 1862, a system of boarding out was established by which orphan or abandoned children were removed from the workhouses and cared for in the homes of local foster families. Over the course of the post-Famine era, there was an evolution in what Poor Law officials and social reformers understood as the purpose and benefits of this form of non-institutional care for pauper children. Whereas the boarding out system was introduced to minimise the mortality of infants, its purpose changed as the upper-age limit was extended to the provision of a family-based upbringing for children which encompassed the entire period of their childhood. Initially, only orphaned or abandoned infants under 2 were eligible for boarding out and they were returned to the workhouse at the age of 5 or, at the discretion of Boards of Guardians, at the age of 8 if their health was deemed delicate. This discussion explores the progressive extension of the upper-age limit and the significance of the concept of childhood in these extensions.⁵⁹

The initial limitation of boarding out to infants under 2 reflected the prevailing concerns that had been expressed by commentators and the wider public about the extent of infant mortality in the workhouses during the late 1850s. As explored in Chapter Seven, these concerns had peaked in 1860 with the publication of John Arnott’s report on the health and mortality of children in the Cork workhouse.⁶⁰ The Poor Law Commissioners were themselves advocates of a boarding out system. In 1859, they acknowledged, ‘the great difficulty of rearing children who are admitted

⁵⁹ For general overviews of the establishment and operation of the boarding out system in Ireland, see: Virginia Crossman, ‘Cribbed, contained, and confined?: the care of children under the Irish Poor Law, 1850-1920’, *Éire-Ireland*, 44 (2009), pp 37-61; Caroline Skehill, ‘The origins of child welfare under the Poor Law and the emergence of the institutional versus family care debate’ in Crossman and Gray (eds), *Poverty and welfare in Ireland*, pp 115-26.

⁶⁰ See: Chapter Seven, pp 236-42.

into the workhouse under two years of age, without their mothers'.⁶¹ They further stated that 'a great rate of mortality prevails everywhere, as well as in workhouses, in the class of children under two years of age' but 'that rate is much increased in the workhouses ... as it is found impossible to procure for them ... that kind of substitute for maternal care and solicitude which is necessary to them at that age.'⁶² The Commissioners concluded that, 'the best substitute for the mother, in such cases, is obtained by placing the child during infancy, at nurse with some individual female accustomed to the care of children', who they believed would preserve the health of such children through their attention and affection.⁶³

The Poor Law Commissioners resisted calls from the public for an extension of boarding out to encompass orphans and abandoned children over 2 years. In May 1862, the Dublin College of Physicians had petitioned the Chief Secretary to extend the proposed upper-age limit of boarding out from 5 to 15 years.⁶⁴ The College argued that, 'no cause is more likely to injure the constitution than removal at too early an age from the pure air of the country to the atmosphere of a workhouse', and they cited the development of stronger teeth and bones as well as healthier eyes and skin as the benefits of an extension for children's health.⁶⁵ Alfred Power, the Chief Poor Law Commissioner, argued that an extension was unnecessary, however, as while children under 2 'were not likely to thrive in the workhouse', he contended that the mortality of children from 2 to 15 'is by no means excessive.'⁶⁶ Power further alleged that an extension would encourage parents to abandon their children to the workhouse and

⁶¹ *Twelfth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [2546], H.C. 1859, XI, 317, p. 20.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Copy of a letter addressed to the Chief Secretary for Ireland, and other members of the government, by the Dublin College of Physicians, on the physical effects of rearing children in workhouses*, [348], H.C. 1862, XLIX-I, 655.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Report from the select committee appointed to inquire into the administration of the relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 40.

then collude with relatives to apply to board the children in their homes and thereby receive maintenance payments.⁶⁷

The Poor Law Commissioners further considered that the boarding out of older children with the associated maintenance payments to their foster parents risked the elevation of the boarded out child to a materially better position than the children of the non-destitute poor.⁶⁸ Yet, rather contradictorily, the Commissioners maintained that the principal reason for which children were returned to the workhouse at the age of 5 or 8 was to provide them with a better education than was available to the children of the poor outside of the workhouse. To board out a child until 10 or 12, Alfred Power reasoned, was to ‘deprive that child of the excellent education which he now receives in the poorhouse’, and he added that, ‘a girl would have a far better chance of doing well in the world, if trained in the workhouse, than in the family of a very indignant person’.⁶⁹ This position contrasted with the objections of ratepayers towards the provision of an education to workhouse children that was superior to that for the children of the labouring classes outside, although it should be noted that Power was primarily referencing the training of girls in domestic service.⁷⁰ Were the Commissioners to have agreed that a boarding out system provided advantages to the pauper child in addition to the preservation of infant life, it would have necessitated their tacit acceptance that a period of residency and education in a workhouse was inferior to foster care for the welfare of pauper children.

In 1869, public pressure for an extension of the upper-age of boarding out led to the passage of legislation that empowered Boards of Guardians to board out orphaned and abandoned children up to the age of 10. The Poor Law Commissioners maintained that the extension was ‘solely and exclusively on the ground of health’, and they rejected any supposition that it ‘was to bring up children in private families on account of the risk of demoralization incidental to their being brought up in

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp 39, 40-41.

⁷⁰ See: Chapter Five, p. 123.

workhouse schools.⁷¹ The extension resulted in an increase in the number of boarded out children from 689 to 1,207 between 1869 and 1870. The scale and rapidity of this increase concerned the Commissioners who suspected that Boards of Guardians were boarding out children for reasons other than the preservation of children's health. In 1871, the Commissioners communicated their concerns to Boards of Guardians and they argued that pauper children were best cared for and educated within the workhouse:

It was never intended by the Legislature that healthy children between five and ten years of age should be placed out in families for educational or industrial training, for this would be to send them from an institution in which they possess such means of education in a high degree, together with perfect security for sufficient food, clothing, and medical care, to a home in which there can be only a partial and precarious enjoyment of such advantages, and in which they must be more or less exposed to the risk of evil associations. The Irish workhouse school shut off as it is from all contact with adults other than the teachers, differs in no respect materially from the boarding school to which parents in a better class of life send their children from home for the purpose of a more systematic course of education and discipline.⁷²

The equating of the workhouse to a boarding school for poor children was revealing of how education was viewed by the Commissioners as the principal benefit of children's residency within a workhouse and, moreover, that they did not accept the criticism that a workhouse upbringing resulted in the experience of an unnatural childhood.

By the late 1860s, public opinion on the primary purpose of boarding out had decidedly shifted towards the provision of a more natural upbringing within a family environment. Commentators argued that children raised with a foster family would be better integrated into society and would receive an education more relevant to their future employments. In 1868, for instance, *The Nation* reported that, 'opinion has

⁷¹ *Twenty-fourth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, [C 361], H.C. 1871, xxviii, 1, p. 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*

undergone in this country a gradual but considerable change during the last few years' on the question of the raising and education of orphaned and abandoned children under the Poor Law:

The prevalent idea not long since seemed to be, that the only of dealing with children unhappily so circumstanced was to collect them together into a big house, feed them by contract, teach them a mechanical use of their fingers, cram them with learning ludicrously disproportionate to their mental capacity and future needs, and in the course of time send them adrift into a world which they may have seen in dreams, and which they are just as well prepared to work their way through as any other creatures paralysed in brain and nerve may be. Workhouse schools are the perfection of this system.⁷³

The newspaper argued that the requirement under the 1862 legislation that children were returned to the workhouse at 5 or 8 was 'absurd and revolting' as children's health was undermined when they were removed 'from the open country or the healthy mountain-side, and imprison[ed] ... within whitewashed walls'.⁷⁴

Public support for extensions to the age limit for boarding out stemmed partly from the comparisons made by social commentators between the Irish boarding out system and those in other countries. One of the most influential works was Florence Hill's *Children of the State*, published in 1868, which provided a comparative review of the care of children under the state-run and publicly funded institutional and foster care systems in England, Ireland, Scotland, the United States, British colonial possessions, and continental European states.⁷⁵ Hill advocated the replacement of institutional modes of care with family-based care. Her work was read by social commentators and the wider public in Ireland. In a review of Hill's work, the *Irish Times* reported that, of the boarding out system, 'From every quarter of the globe, under the widest varieties of social circumstances, one uniform answer is returned as to the merits of the system.'⁷⁶ In contrast with the foster care systems in other

⁷³ *The Nation*, 4 Apr. 1868.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Hill, *Children of the state*.

⁷⁶ *Irish Times*, 10 Apr. 1868.

countries, the Irish system was notable in that children were boarded out only up to a certain age and this difference was criticised by newspapers. *The Nation* argued that the required return of children to workhouses placed Ireland ‘behind the rest of the world’ in the care of orphaned children.⁷⁷ Additionally, in 1876, the *Belfast News Letter* argued that the restriction of boarding out to 10 years ‘is not fair to Ireland’ since no such restriction was applied to the boarding out of pauper children in England.⁷⁸

Social commentators argued that the term of boarding out should have encompassed the entire childhood of orphaned and deserted children as defined under the Poor Law from infancy to 15 years. Isabella Tod, a social reformer and advocate of the boarding out system, viewed foster care as ‘a more natural mode of training the children’ than a workhouse and that the family environment would better preserve the children’s morality, promote their individuality, and instil feelings of familial affections.⁷⁹ Tod cast boarding out as a preventative and remedial measure against demoralisation and institutionalisation:

The same causes which have quickened the public conscience, have also made the *individual* stand out more prominently before the public eye than the mass to which he belongs. The attractive orderliness of a large establishment could therefore be no longer accepted as proof that each of the children within it was receiving all needful care and training. The absence – the impossibility – of all particular and personal affection, starves the heart and the brain, and leaves an empty blank The magnitude of all the arrangements of such schools – their monotony, their rigidity, their seclusion – the completely mechanical aspect of everybody and everything – simply crushes the weak, while it maddens the bold. It is an outrage on nature; and the outcome is seen in stunted frames, and weakened minds, and tempers which alternate between apathy and violence, and utter helplessness after years of so-called industrial training. To introduce the children into real homes, where they will at once feel kindness and sympathy, and presently affection ... is not only the way to save newly orphaned children, but has often

⁷⁷ *The Nation*, 4 Apr. 1868.

⁷⁸ *Belfast News Letter*, 21 Jan. 1876.

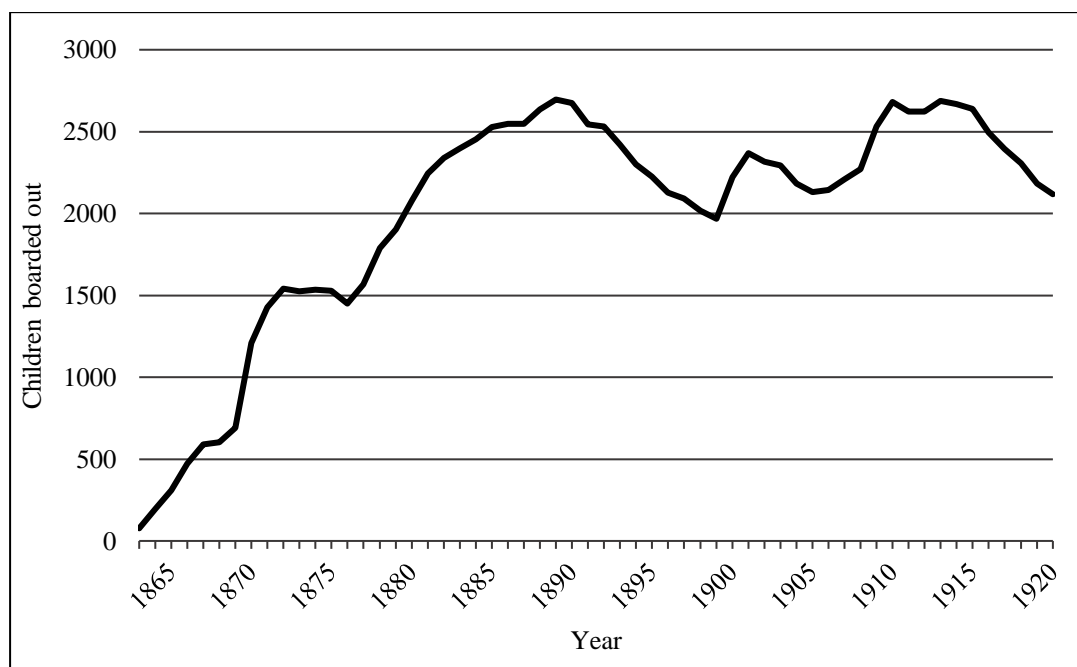
⁷⁹ Tod, ‘Boarding-out of pauper children’, p. 296.

undone the cruel work of years, for some who had suffered from wrong training already.⁸⁰

Such arguments influenced wider public opinion and led to the extension of the upper-age limit to 13 in 1876 and then 15 in 1900. Moreover, in line with the changes in legislation, the central Poor Law authorities shifted their position to favour an extended period of boarding out. By 1906, the official policy of the Local Government Board was that, ‘The aim of all Boards of Guardians should be, if possible, to keep every pauper child outside the workhouse.’⁸¹

Figure 11 details the number of boarded out children between 1863 and 1920. The graph indicates the cumulative nature of the increase in the number of children boarded out from 1863 to 1869. It further shows that the progressive extensions to the

Figure 11: The number of children boarded out in Ireland, 1863-1920



Source: Annual reports of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland, 1863-72, and of the Local Government Board for Ireland, 1873-1920

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp 296-7.

⁸¹ *Thirty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 20.

the upper-age limit in 1869, 1876, and 1900 were introduced when the number of boarded out children had either plateaued or declined under the prevailing regulations. The number of boarded out children peaked at 2,696 in 1889. The lower numbers boarded out during the early twentieth century should be viewed against the lower incidence of orphaned and abandoned children admitted into the workhouses in this period. The 1900 extension did not increase the number of boarded out children to the same extent as earlier extensions, partly because of the appointment of Lady Inspectors in 1902 who demanded higher standards of sanitation in foster homes. This demand precipitated a fall in the number of homes selected for boarding out. Nevertheless, the success of the Lady Inspectors in encouraging more Boards of Guardians to implement boarding out resulted in a subsequent increase in the number of boarded out children until 1914.

There were regional variations in the implementation of the boarding out system. In 1873, 61.3 per cent of the 3,035 children who had been boarded out between 1862 and 1872 were from 31 Unions in eastern Ulster and eastern Leinster.⁸² In contrast, the district inspector for south-east Connaught reported that boarding out had been adopted to a 'very limited extent' in the west of Ireland.⁸³ This east-west divergence persisted into the early twentieth century. In 1908, Marie Dickie, a Lady Inspector for Boarded Out Children, reported that the main obstacle to the establishment of boarding out in western Unions was the lack of appropriate foster homes.⁸⁴ Dickie noted that some western workhouses contained no orphaned or abandoned children, but she added that many Boards of Guardians simply made no effort to establish boarding out.⁸⁵ By 1910, however, an additional 28 western Unions had introduced boarding out since the appointment of Lady Inspectors in 1902.⁸⁶ The expansion of boarding out in rural Unions accounted for a significant increase in the

⁸² *First annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 794], H.C. 1873, xxix, 417, pp 58-95.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸⁴ *Thirty-sixth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 140.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Thirty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 28-33.

numbers of rural boarded out children during the early twentieth century. In 1897, 107 of 159 rural Unions had implemented a system of boarding out, and the children boarded out from these Unions accounted for 57.0 per cent of the 2,091 children boarded out in Ireland.⁸⁷ The urban Unions of Belfast, Cork, North Dublin, and South Dunlin accounted for the remaining 900 boarded out children.⁸⁸ By 1915, however, boarding out was operating in 136 rural Unions and they accounted for 77.1 per cent of the 2,638 children boarded out in total.⁸⁹

The boarding out system failed to remove as many children from the workhouses as some commentators had hoped. This disappointment was a product of a limited understanding about the family circumstances of pauper children. The popular assumption that most pauper children were orphaned or abandoned had persisted since the Great Famine and led to an overestimation of the numbers of children who qualified for boarding out. For instance, in 1876, John Ingram claimed before *Social and Statistical Inquiry Society of Ireland* that a large majority of pauper children would have been boarded out if all Boards of Guardians had implemented the system.⁹⁰ This claim was challenged by James Kavanagh who argued that, ‘not more than 5,000 or 6,000 were fit to be boarded out’ from the approximate total of 15,000 children.⁹¹ By the late nineteenth century, the realisation that most children were ineligible for boarding out due to their family circumstances resulted in the redefinition of an orphaned child to encompass a greater number of pauper children.

The 1898 and 1902 Pauper Children (Ireland) Acts gave ‘a wider interpretation to the terms “orphan child” and “deserted child”’ to include children whose parents were either ‘out of Ireland’, ‘under sentence of penal servitude’, ‘suffering permanently from mental disease’, or ‘permanently bedridden or disabled *and* an

⁸⁷ *Twenty-fifth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 8599], H.C. 1897, xxxvii, 405, pp 266-9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Forty-third annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 256-8.

⁹⁰ *Irish Times*, 22 Jan. 1876.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

inmate of a Workhouse.’⁹² Some commentators advocated for an even wider definition to include children whose parents were perceived as drunken, immoral, or vicious.⁹³ Such a redefinition would have eroded the rights of some pauper parents over their children. In 1883, however, the *Local Government Reform Association* asserted that the rights of pauper parents were of secondary importance to the health and moral upbringing of children, and further argued that such parents had lost their rights over their children when they had applied for poor relief.⁹⁴ Yet, in 1914, the Local Government Board declined to support a proposal ‘to board out the children of vicious parents’ on the basis that, ‘the number of children who would be brought under its provisions would probably be numerically not very large.’⁹⁵ Thus, while the boarding out system facilitated the removal of thousands of children from the workhouses and into non-institutional family-based care, the continued rights of pauper parents meant that most children were ineligible for this mode of care.

V: District and National Schools

Poor Law District Schools were an institutional method by which to remove from the workhouses not only orphaned and abandoned children, but also those who were admitted with parents. In 1855, Boards of Guardians were empowered to combine to form school districts in which the children of all the workhouses in a district could be transferred to the central institution.⁹⁶ The rationale behind District Schools was to

⁹² *Thirty-first annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [Cd 2012], H.C. 1904, xxvii, 1, p. 6; *Thirty-fifth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 85-6.

⁹³ For examples, see: William N. Hancock, ‘Statistics of crime arising from or connected with drunkenness’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 7 (1879), pp 274-7; E. D. Daly, ‘Neglected children and neglectful parents’, *Journal of the Social and Statistical Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 9 (1898), pp 351-7; E. D. Daly, ‘Our industrial and reformatory school systems in relation to the poor’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 10 (1891), pp 524, 534-5; S. S. Millin, ‘The duty of the state towards the pauper children of Ireland’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, 12 (1909), pp 249-62; *Freeman’s Journal*, 4 Jan. 1902; *Cork Examiner*, 5 May 1904.

⁹⁴ *Irish Times*, 25 May 1883.

⁹⁵ *Forty-second annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 19-21.

⁹⁶ *Eighth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 18.

reduce expenditure through the education of children within a single school, and to further separate children from adult inmates. The five schools which had been established in the mid-1850s were soon discontinued, however, because the transfer of children away from their families in the workhouses had deterred some families in need of relief from seeking assistance:

The objects sought in forming these districts were economy of fund and improvement in the character of the school arrangements. These advantages have been realised to some extent in the cases in which the experiment has been tried, but we regret to add not without some detriment to the due administration of relief; ... not only orphans and deserted children have been sent, but likewise children ... whose parents were with them in the workhouse, the Guardians of the contributing Unions being desirous to adopt this means of saving the expense of teachers altogether. The consequence has been that many poor women with families have left the workhouse or refused to enter it, although in great need of relief, because they found their children, or some of them, would be sent to a workhouse many miles distant, and preferred begging through the country to relief on these terms.⁹⁷

Public and official opinion turned against District Schools as a viable alternative to the care of children in a workhouse. At a meeting of the Social Science Association in 1861, William Hancock, a social commentator, stated that ‘the experiment had been tried and failed’, while James Kavanagh, who had initially proposed District Schools in 1853 to improve pauper education, called for the establishment of boarding out for orphaned children and the establishment of small schools outside of each workhouse for children with parents.⁹⁸

The concept of District Schools was revived with the establishment of Industrial Schools for poor children run by religious orders from 1868. In 1885, the Granard Board of Guardians proposed to send children who were admitted with parents to local industrial schools, ‘from whose operation they had the very happiest

⁹⁷ *Tenth annual report of the commissioners for administering the laws for relief of the poor in Ireland*, p. 13.

⁹⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 20 Aug. 1861.

results.⁹⁹ Only two District Schools were set up by clusters of Boards of Guardians, however. In 1890, the Guardians of the Drogheda, Dunshaughlin, Kells, Navan, and Trim workhouses combined to establish a school in a disused prison in Trim. Another school was formed in 1895 in the formerly decommissioned Glin workhouse by the Guardians of Croom, Kilmallock, Limerick, Listowel, Newcastle, and Rathkeale. In 1901, the Cork Board of Guardians suggested ‘taking over one or two of the least utilised workhouses in the county for the constitution of industrial schools for boarding out children’, but no action followed this proposal.¹⁰⁰ The Trim District School opened with a class of 172 children in 1890.¹⁰¹ The total number of children housed within these District Schools amounted to 410 in 1896, but had declined to 347 by 1900, and to 337 by 1914.¹⁰² It remains unclear whether the children sent to the schools were predominately orphans or had parents in the workhouses, but they were probably all long-term inmates as an inspector reported that Boards of Guardians did not send ‘the children of tramps or other persons who are not likely to remain in the workhouse for some time.’¹⁰³

There was extensive debate among welfare reformers about whether the Trim and Glin schools were an appropriate mode of care of pauper children. In 1896, Lord Monteagle, president of the *Irish Workhouse Reform Association*, argued that the District School concept was, ‘still on trial, and there is much difference of opinion as to its merits, while alternatives are advocated by many experts both in England and Ireland.’¹⁰⁴ Some Local Government Board officials were in favour of District Schools. One inspector reported improvements in the health and morality of the children in the Trim school:

⁹⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Sep. 1885.

¹⁰⁰ *Cork Examiner*, 8 Jul. 1901.

¹⁰¹ *Nineteenth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, [C 6439], H.C. 1890-91, xxxv, 1, p. 19.

¹⁰² *Twenty-fourth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 17-18; *Twenty-eighth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 28; 42nd LGB, p. 19.

¹⁰³ *Twentieth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁴ L. Monteagle, ‘Irish Workhouse reform i: the Irish workhouse system’, *The New Ireland Review*, 6 (1896), p. 131.

I think that anyone seeing the children at Trim Joint School, and comparing them with the workhouse children, cannot but form the opinion that their removal from the associations and surroundings of a workhouse must conduce to their physical and moral welfare, and make them, when they go out into the world, more likely to turn out useful members of the general community.¹⁰⁵

A key difference between schools established during the 1850s and those of the 1890s was that the later schools were staffed by religious orders rather than Poor Law officials and they therefore closely modelled existing industrial schools. Catholic clergy were thus supportive of the later schools. The Limerick Catholic chaplain contended that under the oversight of priests and nuns, 'the poor children are now in as healthy a home as could be desired, and under circumstances far happier than their natal stars could ever have promised them.'¹⁰⁶ District Schools were criticised as an unsuitable institutional alternative to boarding out, however. In 1906, a Vice-Regal Commission stated that, 'we prefer boarding-out to any institution, either large or small' and were 'unfavourable to the continuance of any institutional schools' because they were 'decidedly inferior to the natural home life.'¹⁰⁷ The continued debate over suitability of District Schools was a probable factor in the low numbers of schools established in Ireland.

Other Boards of Guardians elected to send children to local National Schools and thereby remove them from the workhouses at least temporarily during the day. In 1898, the Pauper Children (Ireland) Act allowed for the education of children at National Schools within two miles of a workhouse. The Local Government Board expressed hope that the mixing of workhouse children with the children of the local poor in local schools would afford the same benefits as boarding out. One inspector suggested that, 'the mixing in terms of equality with outside children elevates the workhouse children, and in a great measure does away with the baneful associations

¹⁰⁵ *Irish Times*, 3 Apr. 1912.

¹⁰⁶ C. O'Kennedy, 'The Most Rev. E. T. O'Dwyer, D.D. (Continued)', *The Irish Monthly*, 45 (1917), pp 780-1.

¹⁰⁷ *Report of the Vice-regal Commission on Poor Law reform in Ireland*, pp 47, 49.

of the workhouse.¹⁰⁸ Few Boards of Guardians initially availed of this legislation, however, and the *Irish Times* considered it ‘almost a dead letter.’¹⁰⁹ By 1912, children from only 35 workhouses were attending local schools.¹¹⁰ The expense of closing a workhouse school deterred Boards of Guardians from sending children to local schools. The Local Government Board had argued that the attendance of children at local schools represented a financial saving for ratepayers as the employment of teachers in the workhouse became redundant, but the Mountbellew Guardians noted that the closure of their workhouse school would have necessitated large redundancy payments to the teachers whose salaries had been paid mainly through government grants as well as having required the expense of hiring a supervisor to accompany the children to and from the local school.¹¹¹

There were concerns that pauper children would be bullied by other children in local schools and this deterred some Boards of Guardians from adopting this policy. For example, in 1910, the Limavady Guardians decided to retain their workhouse school to protect the children from feeling further stigmatised because of their association with the workhouse:

it would be in the best interest of the children not to send them out to public schools, where they might be insulted, and if that would happen such an impression would be made upon their minds that they would carry it with them all their lives.¹¹²

Pauper children were often sent to National Schools while dressed in the workhouse uniform which invited bullying and undermined their socialisation. As Margaret Crowther points out, pauper children were easily identified and ‘other children could exploit this cruelly.’¹¹³ The Local Government Board advised Boards of Guardians

¹⁰⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 26 May 1906.

¹⁰⁹ *Irish Times*, 9 Nov. 1901.

¹¹⁰ *Fortieth annual report of the Local Government Board for Ireland*, pp 17-18.

¹¹¹ *Connacht Tribune*, 29 Sep. 1918. See also: *Strabane Chronicle*, 10 Sep. 1910; *Kerry News*, 21 Sep. 1916.

¹¹² *Strabane Chronicle*, 19 Sep. 1910.

¹¹³ Crowther, *The workhouse system*, p. 205. See also: Vivienne Richmond, *Clothing the poor in nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 2013), pp 272-8.

that 'the dress of the workhouse children attending the National School should not partake of the nature of a uniform, but should resemble that of the other pupils', but this practice continued on account of a lack of suitable clothing for children in the workhouses.¹¹⁴

The stigmatisation of pauper children in the public mind went beyond the workhouse uniform, however. In 1906, the Nenagh Guardians were informed by the managers of a local school that were any workhouse children to attend, 'those children would be subjected to annoyance', and that the children already in attendance would be taken out by their parents and moved to a different school.¹¹⁵ One Guardian suggested that the children would wear 'a special outfit without the stamp of the union on them', but the manager replied that the parents and other children 'would know all the same.' The Chairman of the Board therefore recommended that the Guardians had 'better agree to leave them where they are.' In contrast to the boarding out system which provided for the permanent removal of orphaned children from the workhouse, the attendance of children at local schools during the day, many of whom had parents in the workhouses, failed to sufficiently disassociate them from the stigmas of pauperism and the workhouse institution.

VI: Conclusion

The workhouse was criticised by many social commentators and Poor Law officials as unsuitable for the care of children. There were particular concerns about the demoralisation of children, especially girls, through their proximity to adult inmates including unmarried mothers and prostitutes within the same institution. In some workhouses, systems of moral classification were introduced to segregate unmarried mothers away from girls and other women, while some Boards of Guardians also attempted to separate orphaned and abandoned children from the children who were

¹¹⁴ See: Thurles Board of Guardians Minute Book, Dec. 1901. TS, BG/151/A/111.

¹¹⁵ *Nenagh Guardian*, 26 May 1906.

admitted with parents. The institutionalisation of children under the monotony and stigma of the workhouse regime was blamed for the seemingly abnormal behavioural and emotional characteristics of the pauper child. Such children were described as dull, apathetic, sulky, violent, and without individuality; none of which were associated by middle-class observers with their concept of childhood.

Philanthropic efforts to introduce elements of a middle-class childhood into the lives of workhouse children were made through excursions and Christmas celebrations, but such experiences were fleeting. Commentators increasingly advocated for the permanent removal of orphaned and abandoned children from the workhouses through the boarding out system in order to provide children with a more natural upbringing within a family environment. Extensions to the upper-age limit of the boarding out system, and the redefinition of an orphaned child, increased the numbers of children who qualified for boarding out. Yet, although some children with pauper parents were sent to separate District School institutions or attended local National Schools, few of the children who were admitted with their parents were removed from the workhouses. By the twentieth century, the provision of different modes of institutional and non-institutional welfare for children of different family circumstances had contributed to the diversification of childhood experiences under the Irish Poor Law.

Conclusion

Pauper childhoods

This thesis has conducted a broad study of the provision of poor relief for children under the Irish Poor Law. The aim has been to explore the various forms of poor relief encountered by poor children and their families, and to consider whether the provision of such relief was influenced by cultural constructs of childhood in post-Famine Ireland. This thesis has charted children's interactions with the workhouse from their initial admission either alone or with their family, through their education in literacy and industrial training, to the impact of these institutions upon their physical and mental health. Through this analysis, some popular assumptions have been challenged, particularly those related to the demographics of pauper children, while others have been largely substantiated, such as those concerning the enforcement of strict regimes of discipline and punishment. The absence of children's voices from the sources available for the study of the Irish Poor Law has meant that this thesis has focused upon adults' perspectives on pauper children and their childhoods, rather than upon the experiences of the children themselves.

This thesis has applied novel statistical methodologies to Irish poor relief sources to examine the demographics of pauper children. Whereas distinct regional variations have been observed in the receipt of poor relief at the aggregate level, the urban-rural contrast was the most apparent geographical distinction in the numbers and proportional representation of children in the workhouse populations. Through the analysis of admission and discharge registers, the family unit, in all its varied forms and circumstances, has been shown to have been central to understanding the reasons for which children were admitted into a workhouse. Some families qualified to avail of outdoor relief in their economy of makeshifts, but for most families, their access to poor relief was limited to the workhouse institution. An application for workhouse relief was reportedly treated as a last resort by many parents on account of their fear of being separated from their children upon admission.

A key finding of this research has been the significant changes within the demographics of pauper children after the Great Famine as the workhouse populations began to reflect the causes of destitution outside of famine conditions. The number of children in the workhouses rapidly declined after the Famine, but the departure of many who had been orphaned or abandoned during the disaster was delayed until such point as they could support themselves outside. This prevalence of orphaned and abandoned children informed the development of poor relief policies towards education and industrial training during the early 1850s.

Pauper education was viewed as an essential preventative against the presumed tendencies of pauper children towards hereditary pauperism and juvenile delinquency. The adoption of the National Education system was also a means by which workhouse children were provided with an education similar to the children of the poor outside. Yet, as evidenced by the findings of National Education inspectors, the rhetoric behind pauper education was not matched by the actions of many Boards of Guardians who neglected to provide adequate funding or to hire sufficient numbers of qualified teachers. In any case, industrial training was perceived of as a more appropriate form of education for pauper children. However, rather than ensuring children received a certain level of training, Poor Law Guardians frequently hired out children from an early age in order to speed their removal from the workhouse and thereby reduce the financial burden upon the ratepayers. The lack of supervision of hired out children reportedly precipitated much mistreatment and abuse.

The workhouses were a source of vital medical relief for thousands of sick poor children in the post-Famine era. Although the exact extent of child mortality in the workhouses remains unclear, it is probable that most deaths were of children who had been admitted with a pre-existing illness or in a state of emaciation on account of their destitution. Nevertheless, there was a widely held belief among the public that mortality among pauper children was excessive and was a product of children's poor nutrition within a workhouse. Children's physical and psychological health was negatively impacted by the institutional environment, and this was a leading

motivation behind efforts to provide middle-class childhood experiences in the workhouses and to remove children into alternative forms of care.

The cultural imaginings of a pauper childhood that developed over the course of the post-Famine era were ambiguous and often contradictory. Pauper children were variously represented as innocent victims of circumstance, as potential delinquents and societal threats, as a national economic resource, as morally contaminated, as a state responsibility, and as a social opportunity for remoulding the labouring classes. This thesis has shown that the ways in which these representations were applied to children varied according to a child's family circumstances and according to which aspect of poor relief a child was associated with. Whereas much public attention was directed towards the provision of a family-based childhood for orphaned children through the boarding out system, little sympathy was expressed for the treatment of hired out children who were primarily viewed through an economic-lens as wage-earning labourers. Moreover, the objections raised against the attendance at local schools by children who had parents in a workhouse revealed that such children were defined more by their presumed moral corruption and the stigma of pauperism rather than by the notion of childhood innocence. It was the difficulty encountered by the poor relief authorities in removing such pauper children from the workhouses on account of the children's association with the workhouse institution itself which led Susanne Day to remark, in 1912, that, 'the problem of the workhouse child is yet to be solved - it is one of the vexed questions of the day.'¹ Social constructs of childhood were fundamental to the provision of poor relief for children in the workhouses of the Irish Poor Law.

¹ Day, 'The workhouse child', p. 170.

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